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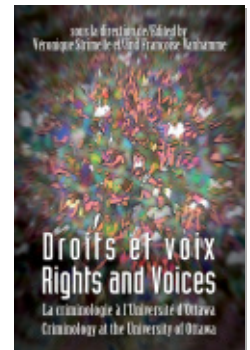
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# Em-bodying Criminology: (Ex-)Prisoners' Bodies in Time and Space

*by*

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## INTRODUCTION

Criminological texts are littered with bodies: incarcerated bodies, stigmatized bodies, addicted bodies. Criminologists speak of gendered bodies, resisting bodies, and marginalized bodies. Bodies are everywhere. At the same time, criminology has largely reproduced the Western tradition of conceptualizing the body as “one of absence or dismissal,” as if “the thinking subject is disembodied” (Price & Shidrick 1999, 1). With some notable exceptions (such as the work of Frigon 2007a and 2007b, or Rimke 2003), criminology has failed to attend to how “lived bodies” are experienced across time and space as *sites* of social interaction. In this paper we draw on feminist, Foucauldian and interactionist scholarship to think about the incarcerated and subsequently emancipated bodies of former prisoners. We contend that the experiences of (ex-)prisoners provide dramatic examples of the intersection of physicality, subjectivity, and social interaction, as power relations are, sometimes literally, “played out” on, and through, their bodies.

We first present an integrated theoretical framework that draws on symbolic interactionist, Foucauldian and feminist geographic theory. We then turn to data from an ethnomethodological study to explore how corporeality informs and conditions experiences of prison and resettlement. In this section we first attend to the body in prison and subsequently consider how the “free” body is constrained by both stigma and its own physiological limits. We conclude by attending to the tension between performance and performativity.

## 1. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper situates itself at the crossroads of a number of theoretical traditions. Early feminist problematization of the stratified Cartesian dualisms (mind/body, male/female) as leading “a subterranean existence, structuring Western thought in general and its political tradition in particular” (Cool 1988, 2), focused attention on the significance of the gendered body. Over the past twenty years scholarship has refined our understanding. The accusation of essentialism (see Young 2003) and recognition that (some) men are also defined by their bodies impelled us to appreciate that only a particular type of man is perceived to be capable of transcendence (Price and Shidrick 1999, 2). This highlights the importance of intersectionality and the significance of the multiple social stratifications—such as race, class or sexual orientation—that are scripted onto bodies. Moreover, the work of Foucault (1979/1995) on “docile bodies” has allowed theorists (notably Bartky 2002) to understand regulation as corporally enacted, and alerted us to the significance of power relations operating *through* discourse and *on* bodies to “produce and destabilize subjects” (see Osborne and Segal 1994).

The insights from feminist and Foucauldian scholarship provide a rich conceptual point of entry. Bodies are, however, “both subject and material object” (Schildkrout 2004, 32). They are not only *inscribed*, they are the interactive *medium* through which we negotiate, contest and experience the social world. Therefore we need a conceptual framework that makes room for a *spatially located* “reflective acting subject . . . without returning to either biological or psychological essentialism”

(Brickell 2005, 29). We return to the early work of Erving Goffman (1959, 1963) on the presentation of self and identity, as well as the work of feminist geographers (see Smith 1993; McDowell 2002; Newberry 2003; and Longhurst 2005), with their insights into space, to round out the theoretical framework. Goffman's dramaturgical perspective speaks of scripts as the subtext of the performances we give, and give off, in our daily lives. These scripts allow participants to "make sense" and affirm their own conceptual frameworks through familiarity. At the same time, the notion of performance highlights not only agency, but also the fact that discursive incongruencies get played out in complex ways. The appearance of a common script may obscure the very process that is inherent to performance. One party may be performing cynically and "act in a certain way solely in order to give the kind of impression to others that is likely to evoke from them a specific response he is concerned to obtain" (Goffman 1959, 6).

Of course, as Goffman's work on "front stage" and "back stage" suggests, performances are spatially situated. Here feminist geographers, who conceive of the body as a primary geographic site, provide a framework through which we can think about corporeality as implicated in social experiences (see McDowell 2002; and Newberry 2003). The body is not merely a vehicle used to transport us between experiences, but rather is a space on which meaning is inscribed and understood. Reciprocally, this corporal element shapes our experiences. The body, for example "marks the boundary between self and other in a social as much as physical sense, and involves the construction of a 'personal space' in addition to a literally defined physiological space" (Smith, 1993, 102). It is always discursively and materially situated (see Longhurst 2005), and subjectively experienced.

Our argument, then, is that, in order to explore the experiential meaning of "being in the world" (see Csordas 1994), we need to attend to the tension between the regulated body and the lived body. In this paper, our ontological approach echoes our political and theoretical positioning. That is to say, we consciously prioritize the narrative, grounding our analysis in the subjective experiences of former long-term prisoners as we seek to understand the interactions, negotiations, and resistance of captive/freed bodies moving through time and space within the context of broader social, political, gendered and classed discourses

and practices. We contend that, by employing the diverse conceptual framework outlined above, we are able to shed light on the dialectical and intersecting meanings that emerge.

## 2. METHODOLOGY AND SAMPLE

The data for this paper came from a larger ethnomethodological research project, “Release and Reintegration after Prison: Negotiating Gender, Culture, Identity,” headed by Professor Sylvie Frigon, funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, and focused on the reintegration of both male and female long-term prisoners in Ontario and Quebec. While criminology is filled with quantitative data on the imprisoned and, to a lesser extent, the paroled, we are less often afforded the opportunity to hear the voices of those who have been released after incarceration. This research attempted to centre these voices. We asked twenty men currently living in Ontario, who had previously been incarcerated for a minimum of ten years and who had been out of prison for more than five years, to participate in semi-structured one-on-one interviews which lasted between one and a half and three hours. Sixteen of the twenty men were serving life sentences (which in Canada means that prisoners remain under the authority of correctional services until death), and the amount of time they had spent in prison ranged between ten years and more than thirty years, the median time served being eighteen years. Most of them had been out of prison for between five and ten years, but two had been out for more than twenty years. Given the duration of the carceral and post-carceral periods, it is not surprising that the men who participated in this research were predominantly middle-aged: twelve men were between forty and fifty-five, seven were over fifty-six, and only one was under forty.

The diversity of the sample notwithstanding, corporality emerged as significant in the interviews. Not only did the men speak of their ageing and marked *male* bodies, but their narratives were resplendent with stories illustrating the temporal, spatial and contextual conditioning of experience. It is the analysis of these interviews, and of the stories embedded within them, that informs the remainder of this paper.

We begin by examining the experience of the body in prison before considering how age, work, and sexuality mediate the paroled body's experience of release and re-entry.

### 3. THE IMPRISONED BODY

In penal institutions power relations are enacted corporeally. Not only is the body of the prisoner confined, but its movements are regulated. The body must rise at 7 a.m., shower at 4 p.m., eat at 4:45 p.m., and so on. The men could not affect the spatial locations of their physical bodies, but their size, their appearance, and, within very constrained options, their activities remained under their jurisdiction, and these aspects of their physiques emerged as sites of struggle. Succinctly demonstrating Foucault's assertion that where there is "power there is resistance" (1978, 95), the respondents used their bodies to challenge relations of power by, for example, engaging in hunger strikes, participating in riots, and refusing to labour. Relations of power can also be rendered visible when subjugated populations assert agency and reclaim authority through body work. Certainly among the men we spoke to there were many who literally wrote a discourse of resistance on their bodies by scripting their (counter-)conformity and affiliation in the form of prison tattoos (see DeMello 1993; Hunt and Phelan 1998; and Kent 1997; see also Neti 2003 on female IRA prisoners' deployment of menstrual blood, a very different gendered and embodied resistance tactic). In this way we see that the body is not only an instrument, but also the canvas on which social reality is inscribed (Csordas 1994, 12).

At the same time as the prisoners' bodies were instruments of resistance, they were also tools of, or impediments to, survival in the volatile environment of prisons marked by the dominant "hegemonic masculinity [which] accentuates male dominance, heterosexism, whiteness, violence, and ruthless competition" (Sabo, Kupers, and London 2001, 5). This dynamic speaks to the insight of Foucault (1978) that power does not flow from *above* but permeates social relations *among*, in this case, prisoners. Many prisoners spoke of very deliberately "doing gender" (see West and Zimmerman 1987), by drawing on normative

classed and gendered scripts of male virility as reflected in strength and muscularity. They masculinized and sometimes “hypermasculinized” their bodies (see, for example, Mutchler 2002). As one of them, Gerry, recalled:

When I was in, I had a workout partner and we worked out quite steady, at least five days a week, sometimes six. And we had our own programme and I was probably in the best shape of my life. We did weights. We did all that and I probably had muscles on top of muscles.

Those men whose bodies were not amenable to such transformation self-consciously drew on other strategies to overcome the limitations of their physiques, as Marcus, another interviewee, explained:

I got along with everybody. . . . I had to 'cause I was so small, I didn't want to offend anybody. . . . You have to help your friend, and we all had knives on us. I was a skinny little kid and I'm thinking, “I'm going to die today.”

Evidently gender, a constructed “emergent feature of social situations” (West and Zimmerman 1991, 126), provided a script that was integral to the performances of the individuals in this study. However, as the prisoners started to prepare for release, the power relations in which their bodies were situated were altered, and so was their corporal presentation of self. Prisoners were aware that the hypermasculinized body, which was useful in prison, was potentially counterproductive in their bid for parole, as it could be read as dangerous, risky or threatening, and they *consciously* reconfigured their physical bodies. Prisoners also feared that their hypermasculine bodies would be read by members of communities outside prison in a similar manner and would therefore undermine their ability to reintegrate. Another interviewee, Doc, said: “I stopped working out in prison. . . . I didn't want to intimidate people, . . . so I had to do all I could to shrink to get out of jail, . . . to help me . . . presenting a package.”

The historical analysis by Heidi Rimke (2003) of psychiatric governance *through* the body alerts us to the significance of morality

being “read off” bodies. Rimke’s innovative and theoretically dense work explores how raced, classed and gendered bodies were read in psychiatric discourse and practice in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but we still see (subversive) resistance corporally enacted as prisoners played the game in order to exploit the parole board’s classed reading (see Dunk 1991) of the body to obtain their release. Extending Goffman’s argument somewhat, we maintain that in some cases exploiting a script, manipulating the expectations of the other, can be an act of resistance. In this case, the men used their knowledge of the “public transcript” (Scott 1990, 2) to enact a favourable “front stage” performance (see Goffman 1959). A similar process was evident with those men who were limited in the degree of physical transformation they could affect. These individuals offered up a “cynical performance” (Goffman 1959, 6) to realize a public identity that *overrode* how their bodies were read by others. One of our interviewees, F.G., describes the situation:

You have to remove the fear. I’m [a big guy]. I committed murder. “Now wait a minute, we don’t want this big sucker running around this neighbourhood. We don’t know what he’s like. We don’t know what he’s going to do.” And I can understand that. But in the same circumstances, they don’t know me, they only know what they hear, and I have to convince them otherwise.

Reflecting and reinforcing power relations, during the carceral period, convicts’ bodies are stripped and confined within cells, within blocks, and within prisons. Further, the convict body is inscribed with a particular identity that seeks to disrupt any other that was previously held (see Goffman 1961). However, even confined bodies are not just acted upon, but are actively engaged with, as sites of resistance and as instruments used to survive, and even thrive, in the prison milieu. This phenomenon continues once the prisoner is released from captivity. In the next section, we attend to the classed and gendered body as it is experienced in shifting social and spatial locations. Because the freed body is able to move through a plethora of spaces, we also examine the intersection of various geographic scales as the micro-level space of the body intersects with macro-spatial locations in the community.



#### 4. THE FREE (?) BODY

Once the body is released from the penal institution, its meaning shifts. As the former prisoners resettled into society, they found themselves navigating the movement of the body in broader social spaces, and valued the ability to transport their bodies between a multitude of locations and locales. Reflecting on his re-entry into the community after twenty-three years in prison, F.G. noted:

I walked and walked and walked and walked and walked, and then I walked some more . . . because I was free. When you're in prison you can only walk to here, to there . . . and you're always bumping into people, . . . you're never alone. And I got out . . . and . . . I was alone. I could walk wherever I wanted to and I didn't bump into anybody. I was alone. I had my space to walk in. And it, it's what I had to get used to.

The prisoner is no longer physically confined, but (as we shall discuss in the next section), the newly *freed* body is nonetheless *constrained* by normative discourses and expectations, as well as the limits of its own corporeality. As the men confronted and negotiated the meanings of their stigmatized and ageing bodies, the tension inherent to the concept of "freedom" in the context of "our current regimes of government through freedom" (Rose 1999, 27) became evident.

Erving Goffman identified stigma as "an attribute that is deeply discrediting" (1963, 3) and that can result in the individual's identity being spoiled, "so that he stands a discredited person facing an unaccepting world" (1963, 19). The individual who possesses this spoiled identity is thus aware of his flaw and anticipates a negative reaction. In this research, the respondents were afraid that after release their status as former prisoners would be, quite literally, read *off* their bodies. As one of them, Bobby, put it: "Every guy thinks that he's got 'convict' written on his forehead, he's very nervous walking through Union Station, getting off the train, everybody knows and stuff like that." Over time some of the men started to realize that by not conforming to the stereotype of criminals they could *pass* (see Goffman 1963). Bob, for instance, said:

I'm a white middle-class WASP. . . . I get a fair degree of mileage out of just who I am and the way I look. I don't appear to be an ex-offender . . . whatever that is! But that's the comment that's been made many, many times to me.

For many of the respondents, managing the body became a way of managing information and ensuring that, while they were always *discreditable*, they were not *discredited* (see Goffman 1963). For example, they were keenly aware that the tattoos that, inside the prison, had indicated resistance and/or in-group affiliation, now had the potential to *mark* them as ex-prisoners and therefore as outsiders. This phenomenon is not new: we know that in Japan, for example, tattoos were long used to punish the bodies of some criminals and to mark the bodies of other individuals as “untouchable” (DeMello 2000, 72), and that, more generally, “tattoos, scarification, and brands” have been “imposed by authoritarian regimes in a symbolic denial of personhood” (Shildkrot 2004, 323). While the current surge in popularity of body art may undermine the negative connotations of tattoos in the future, it is clear that the stigma, or perceived stigma, lingers in contemporary society, despite the fact that the marks are now self-inflicted (see DeMello 2007; and Jones 2000). One interviewee, Gowan, elucidated the very real consequences of the “convict body” (DeMello 1993, 12) outside of the prison walls:

They kept telling me “You're killing me with the shirt on,” 'cause I'm full of tattoos, and I just said, “I'm not doing it. Every time I take my shirt off and wear my T-shirt, I don't have a job.” So I left my shirt on—I needed that job . . . and I said, “I'm a good worker, and I don't need to be fired over tattoos, especially when the whole world's almost full of them now.” And he [the boss] says “I'm not going to fire you,” and I had my shirt off. The next day he told me not to come in.

Former long-term prisoners must cope with bodies not only marked by tattoos but also marked by age. Unlike tattoos, which can be literally covered up, ageing proved less amenable to manipulation and hence more challenging. All bodies age, but how this corporeal degeneration is read is culturally conditioned and subjectively negotiated. With

only two exceptions, all the respondents were released as middle-aged men and the issue of agedness was a recurring theme in the interviews. These ex-prisoners were forced to confront the disjuncture between their personal identities as virile men in the prime of life and the way their ageing bodies were read by others in society. While this tension may speak to the nature of time in prison, which is uninterrupted by the temporal and social markers of the outside world (see Mancini 2006), it also highlights the fact that meaning is always culturally and contextually conditioned. Where we see that a solid, experienced older convict has earned, received and, indeed, expected respect within the prison, this is not mirrored in broader society. The men in this study were obliged to come to terms with this cultural disjuncture upon their release from prison.

Mancini (2007) argued that prisoners disregard the passage of time and focus on their post-release plans in order to maintain hope. However, once a prisoner is freed, this hope can turn to “despair as he begins to feel his real age” (2007, 34). In the community, the men in our study were unable to ignore the fact that years had passed and been lost to them, and yet they may have felt “psychologically the age they had been on entry to prison” (Jamieson and Grounds 2005, 37; see also Jamieson and Grounds 2005 more generally, as well as Jamieson 2008, on temporality and the ex-prisoner). The experience of suddenly being confronted by the reality of time passed is demonstrated in the following self-deprecating story from Tom:

I would go to the . . . bars [in] downtown Peterborough, . . . pull up on my bike and go in there, and I realized, you know, these kids all think that their Dad is looking for them. When that realization sunk into me . . . it freaked me out a bit.

In essence, Tom, destabilized by the challenge to his script, was forced to confront role dissonance engendered by the disjuncture between his subjective personal identity and a very different social identity (see Goffman 1963) that was being read off his body by the younger attendees at the bars. Many of the men experienced similar age-related role conflicts, and struggled with reconciling their personal and social identities when they attempted to enter the workforce or engage in intimate relations.

For the most part the men left prison intent on making up for lost time, and identified finding a *good* job as the key to success: in Doc's words, "in order to be a man, I got to work and . . . make money, and buy things, like a house." Given that most of the interviewees had been gainfully employed before and during their incarceration, they did not anticipate problems obtaining work. They saw themselves as competent individuals who, given their ability to survive prison, were capable of adapting and thriving. Luc, for example, told us: "I always kept saying to myself, 'Luc, you shouldn't have any difficulty finding a job. You're able. . . . Why would you have difficulty?'" For a number of the men in the study however, their ability to normalize their positions within capitalist society and within typical gender relations (see McDowell and Court 1994; and Callard 1998) by assuming the identity of competent workers was undermined by extended periods of joblessness. Luc was able to reflect on this with reference to his lack of saleable skills, his physique, and the reality of his age:

What's this guy offering me—some talk? I don't need talk. I need somebody's going to put doors on my wall. All right. Has he ever done that? No. Can I train him? He's kind of old, eh? He's small, and he's old. So—no, I don't want him." . . . I forget that by [that] time I was fifty years old. To me it didn't mean anything, but to an employer it meant a lot. It meant a very dangerous person to hire. "Tomorrow he's going to get sick, and we're going to pay for him. He's going to hurt himself, and we're going to pay for him.

In addition to coping with a personal and social identity disjuncture based on how their bodies were being read by potential employers, the men also had to deal with the limitations imposed by their ageing bodies. The loss of physical strength was particularly important for men who relied on this corporeal attribute to help establish their masculinity (see Drummond 2007). Doc, who was forty-eight years old at the time of the interview, noted:

What I do is very laborious, you know what I mean? There's a lot of friggin' heavy, heavy work that I do. And my body just can't take it any more and I'm just . . . I don't know how much longer I can

do what I do, you know? My back's going, . . . both my knees . . . and . . . it's just . . . you know, it's heavy.

In other words, these men experienced a crisis of personal identity. As working-class men, they did not have access to a transcendent and self-validating alternative identity. Instead, we see the intersection of class and gender scripts in the public *denial* of corporeal degeneration, and the celebration and privileging of the strong, physically competent working-class male body (see Dunk 1991) when Doc finishes the story:

I said to the foreman, I said, "You see half these guys? They're the types that go around saying, you know, 'Look at the old man, look at the old man.' You know, every time we pick one and put him in to do my job, two hours later they can't take it." . . . I've been doing the same job for three weeks.

Not only did the men have to confront their agedness in relation to the labour market, they also came to realize that their older bodies no longer embodied the youthful sexual ideal. According to Foucault (1978), sexuality is not physiologically determined, but is constituted through power relations and discursively realized. Power relations are "the multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their own organizations" (1978, 92). Foucault's genealogy of expert categorization and (ab)normalization of specific sexual practices alerted us to the regulatory significance of sexual discourses that condition identities. Certainly, the narratives of the ex-prisoners spoke to this, at the same time as we saw agency and resistance in the men's experiences of their own and others' sexualized bodies. In this study, only one man maintained his pre-prison intimate relationship throughout his incarceration. The remainder remained single or divorced while in prison. A few of the men did marry women in prison, but their opportunities to engage in sexual activity with non-incarcerated partners were constrained to a few private family visits each year. In short, the carceral context severely constrained the men's ability to participate in heterosocial and sexual relations.

It is hardly surprising that as these interviewees started to prepare for release they anticipated the resumption of intimate relations with a

mix of trepidation and eagerness. Barry spoke of “performance anxiety,” while others, fuelled in part by the media’s idealized beauty gleaned from “reading magazines for twenty-odd years” (Doc), relied on gender scripts and assumed that acquiring a particular kind of wife would pose no particular challenge. Once they were released, however, they found that their ability to attract intimate partners was constrained. Luc, for instance, said:

Now I’m out, I’m going on six months, and—excuse the language—I ain’t got a fuck yet. Some-fuckin’-thing wrong man. This is wrong, wrong, wrong, wrong. I’m in the wrong ball park. Something’s wrong.

Tom’s story about arriving at bars, only to realize that the young objects of his desire read him, not as a potential mate, but as somebody’s father and as somebody *old*, who was neither desirable nor welcome, dramatically illustrates the men’s struggle to negotiate gender scripts and their own ageing bodies within the context of social convention and desire. Turning again to Tom:

I went to jail [when I was] twenty-six, . . . so my girlfriends were twenty, twenty-one. . . . I get out at forty-six, and that’s a huge adjustment to make ’cause mentally you’re still looking at twenty, twenty-one-year-old women, . . . and you know . . . intellectually, that that’s not right, that you shouldn’t be looking at them ’cause you wouldn’t want one, because if I had a younger girlfriend, I’d feel like an idiot, you know? . . . So you don’t really want one, but it takes you a while to adjust, to go, “OK, I’m supposed to be with a woman this age, but I’m not attracted to a woman this age.” . . . It came with time.

Here we see not a Goffmanian *performance* but a virtually systematic engagement with “technologies of the self” (see Foucault 1988). Tom consciously laboured to transform his body, his thoughts, his conduct and his sexuality. Reflecting on his reformed, adjusted sexual desire, he reproduced a confessional “self-talk” in which he reiterated expert discourses as he juxtaposed his original (“not right”) desire for

twenty, twenty-one-year-old women to his current relationship with a socially acceptable, age-appropriate woman whom he is “supposed to be with.” In short, regulation was working through discourses on bodies (see Butler 1990) and produced a self-regulating subject, a free man constrained by normative expectations.

In other cases we see a different process. While Tom reconfigured his desire, Jean simultaneously resisted and affirmed power relations when he resolved the tension between age and gender relations by fashioning himself a new positive personal identity that drew on the gendered valorization of older, experienced men:

I was in my late forties when I got out. I was in my mid-twenties when I went in. I didn't think I'd be desirable to the opposite sex any more, because at my age when I got out . . . you know, I used to be a dashing young man, but . . . that's all gone. Now I'm a grey old fox.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

We began this paper by highlighting criminology's limited attention to “lived bodies,” bodies that are experienced across time and space, and emerge as sites of social interaction. Using an integrated conceptual framework that drew on classical social theory (interactionism), feminism, Foucauldian analysis, and geography provided us with a lens through which to render visible the complexity of bodies as both inscribed and interactive. By using our research on the release, re-entry and resettlement experiences of former long-term prisoners, we attempted to demonstrate not only the significance but also the complexity of corporeality.

Drawing on feminist geographers' insight that the body is the primary geographic, we saw that engagement with their corporeality was a choice made by a number of the men as they manipulated their bodies in order to survive their captivity and/or to ensure their release. There was, however, a profound shift as prisoners moved from the institution to society, and this resulted in a discernible experiential temporal layering. In prison, the body was a location where power relations were

played out, and a site and instrument of resistance. When the men's geographic space shifted into the community, the body continued to be implicated in relations of power, and the meaning and experience of corporeality changed. As the men sought to reintegrate into "free" society they relied on the resources at hand to resolve the role dissonance and identity conflicts they confronted. Their resettlement was characterized by a much more subtle regulatory context in which "freedom" opened up opportunities at that same time as it conditioned the possibilities of em-bodied resistance by constraining the former prisoners within normative discourses and expectations.

Through this analysis of corporeality we have attempted to demonstrate the merit of a broad multidisciplinary conceptual lens. To attend to the body only as discursively constituted obscures the complexity of the lived body, and denies agency and engagement, while attending to experience only at a subjective level occludes from view those structures that mediate and nuance the range of possible actions. By integrating agency, subjectivity, and constraint, criminologists are positioned to engage with the tension between performance (see Goffman 1963) and performativity (see Butler 1990), and to appreciate agency and resistance, without denying the regulatory nature of discourses and social practices.

## NOTES

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