

## **Familiarity and strangeness: seeing everyday practices of punishment and resistance in Holloway Prison**

### **Abstract**

London's Holloway Prison, the largest women's prison in western Europe, closed in 2016.

The impact of the closure on the women incarcerated in Holloway, and the prison's place in the local community, is the focus of a project led by Islington

Museum. Here, we develop an innovation, emotion-led methodology to explore photographs of the decommissioned Holloway, asking what they communicate about experiences of imprisonment and practices of punishment. The images illustrate the strategies of control, mechanisms of punishment and tactics of resistance that operate through the carceral space. From a feminist, anti-carceral perspective, we emphasise the importance of *seeing* prison spaces and attending to the emotional responses generated. We offer a creative intervention into dominant government and media narratives of Holloway's closure and suggest that considering what it is that feels familiar and strange about carceral spaces has the potential to operate as a form of anti-carceral work.

### **Keywords**

Anti-carceral; women; imprisonment; Holloway; emotion; punishment; resistance

## Introduction

In 2016 Holloway Prison, Europe's largest prison for women, and one of its most iconic, closed. This closure should be understood in the context of the UK government's policy of relocating urban prisons to rural locations as a cost saving, 'modernising' and expansive project.<sup>1</sup> The history of Holloway, its founding, development, consolidation and now closure, encapsulates the contemporary history of women's imprisonment in the UK (Scraton and Moore, 2014:12). Over the years, Rock (1996:262) observes, Holloway 'moved precariously and rapidly through a succession of political systems, the quest for authority sometimes veering more towards winning the acquiescence of the incarcerated, sometimes more towards the application of force.' In this paper we offer a reading of photographs of Holloway post-closure, arguing that they illustrate particular strategies of control, mechanisms of punishment and tactics of resistance in the carceral space. Adopting an anti-carceral feminist perspective (Carlton, 2016; Davis, 2005), we question the expansion and naturalisation of the prison system and the state's increasingly punitive dependence upon it. The reliance on prison to address social problems requires interrogation (Davis, 2005). Anti-carceral perspective necessitate looking differently and becoming attuned to the simultaneous strangeness and familiarity of everyday materialities of incarceration, challenging its apparent inevitability. We contribute to the anti-carceral project by offering a reading of four photographs of Holloway that force us to imagine everyday life in its restrictive, punitive and limiting conditions.

Visual representations of carceral spaces can offer powerful critique (Brown, 2014; Carrabine, 2012) and a means of doing anti-carceral work. Whilst the Anglo-American prison is readily consumed in film and television (Carrabine, 2012), its audience often has little experience of imprisonment (Brown, 2009). By revealing the bareness of the institution and the efforts required by women to survive where the state provides so little, these photographs 'make visible that which would be unseen' (Code, 2014:19-21, in McNaul, 2017) and counter the 'holiday camp' narrative perpetuation by mainstream media (Marsh, 2009). Photographs sit at the intersection of the personal and social (Kuhn, 1995), these of Holloway depict an institutional, state-owned *and* private, intimate space. The intimate and everyday lives of incarcerated women are shaped and controlled by prison architecture, routines and institutional powers, inseparable from social practices of punishment, control and

surveillance. We contribute to this understanding by engaging directly with visual traces of the carceral space. It is important to acknowledge and keep in mind the absence of imprisoned women – our aim is not to over-determine or voice women's experiences, but to offer a feminist, anti-carceral reading of the photographs. This facilitates a move beyond the narratives of women prisoners as victims or monsters, to women as people getting on with their daily lives in the difficult and constraining conditions of prison.

### **Radical reform, selective histories**

Holloway's founding, development and consolidation encapsulates the contemporary history of women's imprisonment in the UK (Scruton and Moore, 2014). Opened as a mixed prison in 1852, Holloway was designated women-only in 1902. The Victorian building was rebuilt between 1971 and 1985. Rock (1996) observes how the redevelopment reflected changing attitudes towards women and crime, tracing how penal ideology shapes prison architecture. Whilst there were problems with the new design, it was relatively modern and provided social, rehabilitative and educational programmes. However, it was often neglected and under-resourced: in 1995, the Chief Inspector of Prisons walked out in disgust at squalid conditions (Kendall, 2002). More recently, Holloway was reported to be a well-run and safe institution with caring staff (Roberts and Cain, 2015), supporting women with histories of trauma, homelessness and poverty (Cain, 2018)<sup>ii</sup>. Holloway encapsulated the conflicting aims of punishment and care that typify the women's prison estate. It was simultaneously a place of punishment, blame and pain (Scott and Codd, 2012) *and* a space where women could access support – a result of community and non-profit engagement with the prison. Post-closure, women praised this support, many reporting the negative impact the closure had on them (Cain, 2018). The pathologizing consequences of these contradictory aims have been widely discussed in feminist criminology (Hannah-Moffat, 2001; Carlen, 2012; Gelsthorpe, 2002).

Michael Gove, then Justice Secretary, situated Holloway's closure within the 'radical reform' of the prison system, declaring:

'a new beginning for female offenders with women prisoners serving their sentences in more humane surroundings better designed to keep them out of crime. [We] will

close the inadequate and antiquated Holloway prison and invest in 21<sup>st</sup> century solutions to the problems of criminality' (Gove, 2015).

Gove's individualising language of 'criminality' reinforces the neoliberal 'responsibilising agenda', emphasising personal transformation and minimising the state's role in addressing inequalities and marginalisation (Chadwick and Clark, 2017:52). Whilst 'reform' suggests meaningful change, as Peter Dawson, director of Prison Reform Trust, comments: 'massive investment in new prisons is not matched by a credible plan to reduce our reckless overuse of prison in the first place' (PRT, 2017). The reform agenda is an expansionist, capital-driven enterprise: 10,000 new prison spaces were planned to replace those closed (Corporate Watch, 2018). Emphasising Holloway's inadequacies provided a post-hoc justification for an economic decision based on the cost-saving benefits of closing inner-city prisons.

In invoking Holloway's failings Gove deployed a progress narrative, where Holloway's closure signalled investment in the reimagining of the modern carceral space. This narrative is central to the reform agenda and not specific to Holloway, but for Holloway the juxtaposition of antiquated and modern was bolstered by a media fascination with its past in reporting its closure. Holloway held some of Britain's most famous women prisoners, including suffragettes and notorious murderers and for a long time the prison was a symbol of women's punishment. References to these women appeared repeatedly in broadsheet and tabloid media, accompanied by photographs of the long demolished Victorian building. Noting this fixation with Holloway's past, campaigner Maureen Mansfield (2016) remarked: 'what strikes me as odd, even misleading, is to spend so much time talking about the history of the place, without drawing parallels to the modern prison and the problems facing it (and facing society)'. The government's narrative of 'progressive' change made invisible the inadequacies of the prisons women moved to and concealed the state's continual othering of prisoners and resultant punitive, economically driven carceral policies.

We disrupt the progress narrative that frames Holloway's closure by understanding Holloway as a lived rather than static space, shaped by relationships and emotions, and the ideologies of punishment that permeate government policy, practice and public imagination. As Massey (1999) and others (Valentine, 2001; Lefebvre and Nicholson-Smith, 1991) argue, space is performative and mobile, rather than essential and static. Space has a symbiotic

relationship with social identities, inequalities and relations (Valentine, 2001). Massey (2005:9) suggests the interactions that produce the spaces we live through range ‘from the immensity of the global to the intimately tiny’. The space of Holloway, so central to the justification for its closure, is entangled with practices, ideologies and gendered pains of imprisonment (Baldwin, 2018; Chamberlen, 2016, 2018; Scraton and Moore, 2014). In looking at the photographs of Holloway we consider how carceral spaces are produced through global discourses of punishment, as well as intimate, emotional and relational lives. Looking illuminates the power and operation of penal institutions and opportunities for resistance within them. Here we offer a critical reading of images of everyday objects in the prison in order to highlight the convergence of the intimate and punitive in prison spaces. Through this critical reading we invite viewers to see the prison space differently, through a feminist, anti-carceral framework.

### **The prison as a site of emotion**

Emotions shape the nature of our experiences, as Davidson and Milligan (2004:524) argue ‘[e]motions can clearly alter the way the world is for us, affecting our sense of time as well as space’. Beyond an analysis of prison conditions – in terms of overcrowding, hygiene, disrepair, etc. – reformist arguments call for greater understanding of prison architecture and its affect (Jewkes, 2016; Thurston *et al*, 2016). Drawing on Ginn (2012), Shepherd and Lenton (2016:8) argue that ‘prisons are not nurturing places...[they are] starved of natural light and constructed from materials that amplify sounds and suppress the senses’. Prison design, they observe, is mentally and emotionally repressive, changing little in 200 years. The emotional landscape of carceral spaces is inherently punitive and disciplinary, ‘impos[ing] both subtle and raw power on those who fail to comply with its regimes’ (Scraton and Moore, 2014:29) <sup>iii</sup>.

Shepherd and Lenton (2016:10) cite Scott’s (2004) description of prisons as ‘anti-therapeutic’ spaces; the feelings of powerlessness, sadness, frustration, loneliness and fear that prison evokes amongst women are well documented (Baldwin, 2018; Chamberlen, 2016; Moore and Scraton, 2014). Disproportionate rates of women’s self-injury in prison – conceptualized by Chamberlen (2016) as a form of Hochschild’s (1983) ‘emotion work’ – is one indication of how harms of imprisonment are ‘displayed and observed on the body’

(Chamberlen, 2016:207-8), finding particularly gendered expression. Emotions, Chamberlen (2016:208) argues, are ‘embodied sensations that are collectively experienced, communicated and constructed under pressure, always in negotiation with the lived environment’. Holloway was a complicated emotional space, undoubtedly offering some women a sense of ‘safety, security, opportunity and even familiarity’ (Baldwin, 2018:51; O’Malley and Devaney, 2015) alongside the painful emotions more generally associated with incarceration (Baldwin, 2018; Chamberlen, 2016; Scraton and Moore, 2014). We consider our emotional responses to photographs of Holloway, and build on these to offer a particular reading that aims to shape the emotional response in the viewer. In doing so we seek to unsettle and interrupt the naturalized place of the prison and its everyday practices. Our approach acknowledges that emotional responses to imprisonment are not confined by prison walls: online discussion is testament to the intense emotions imprisonment can generate, whether state practices are considered too punitive or too lenient. In attending to our own emotions and inviting the viewer to consider our interpretation, we illustrate, in a limited but revealing way, the way we read images of the prison can reinforce or interrupt its legitimization. These photographs do not necessarily lend themselves to a particular interpretation, our contribution is to offer a feminist anti-carceral reading of them. **Everyday carceral geographies**

The emerging field of ‘carceral geographies’ (Moran, 2012; Turner, 2016) has shifted attention to the *spatialised* practices and cultures of incarceration. Work concerned with the nature, distribution and experience of carceral spaces diversifies criminology’s focus on time in penal institutions (Moran, 2012) and demands examination of everyday carceral practices, rituals and activities. From an anti-carceral feminist perspective (Brown and Schept, 2017; Davis, 2005) this exploration of the everyday is vital for puncturing the perception of imprisonment in popular imaginaries that sustain its legitimacy (Novek, 2009) by presenting it as an institution that meets a social need. We similarly aim to create disruption by highlighting the familiarity and strangeness of everyday carceral practices using photographs of Holloway.

The spatial, material and discursive are co-constitutive elements of the lived experience of imprisonment, revealing the workings of power and resistance. For example, Bosworth’s analysis of US prison admissions handbooks demonstrates how the roles of prisoner and guard are constructed through carceral materials. The handbooks reflect shifting



discourses and ideologies of imprisonment, with contemporary materials adopting a managerial rhetoric that rationalises the carceral space, positioning guards as ‘customer service agents’ and prisoners ‘recast as consumers’ (80-81). This positioning of the prison as a commercial enterprise echoes the commodification of incarceration that dehumanises prisoners to sustain capitalist, neo-liberal power regimes, exemplified by US practice (Davis, 2005). Bosworth (2007) illustrates how ideologies and practices of punishment – here a shift from rehabilitation to risk management – are enacted through everyday materials. These handbooks regulate interactions between guards and prisoners, charting changing understandings of these interactions.

Where official documentation reflects institutional discourses, incarcerated individuals’ engagement with objects and spaces reveal tactics for survival and resistance, challenging institutional discourses of imprisonment and illustrating the everyday negotiation and disruption of power. In fieldwork in UK young offenders’ institutes, Baer (2004) observed vast collections of, often empty, toiletries, air fresheners and similar objects in cells. Baer suggests these collections are ‘tactics’ that allow young people to exert control over their environment. Whilst ‘strategies’ are employed by the powerful to seize control, ‘tactics’ enable the less powerful to survive in oppressive spaces (De Certeau, 1984). Tactics seize upon cracks in strategies of control, often leaving ‘visual imprints’ (Baer, 2004), such as the modification of cells, that signal how individuals manage spaces over which they have little control. Prison regimes, characterised by punishment and control, mean there is significant risk involved in tactics such as cell modifications. Therefore, when women seek to disrupt regimes of control through such tactics that make the prison more survivable, the potential consequences can be severe – for example, the loss of privileges or even segregation.

Imprisonment is characterised by isolation and distance, but also proximity to others and limited privacy. The loss of family and other intimate relationships – such as mothering relationships (Baldwin, 20xx) – can be emotionally devastating for prisoners. These intimate attachments are replaced by forced physical closeness to, and interactions with, strangers in the prison environment. Prisoners lose their primary sources of emotional support and are instead expected to navigate a new and complex world of emotional relations. Movement around, reworking of and interaction with this contradictory space can be a tactic (Baer, 2004) for survival, but one compromised by physical and ideological structures. Moran *et al*

(2013) ask if it is possible for individuals to achieve privacy in spaces where they are subject to such scrutiny. They found women in Russian prisons rework the spatial and structural constraints by creating privacy through intimate relationships, by retreating, and by reading books or newspapers in communal areas. Like Baer (2004), they illustrate how the incarceration experience is formed through spaces and objects; which can each offer moments of resistance. The photographs we discuss also document how aspects of women's interaction with the carceral environment resist the geographies of power prison is marked by.

Making space for self in prison also operates as a survival mechanism, exemplified by prison graffiti (Wilson, 2008) and poetry (DeValiant *et al*, 2018). Both material forms of self-expression that shape and express relationships, emotions and, as we explore, establish voice, visibility and resistance in oppressive institutions. Wilson (2008) offers a gendered analysis of graffiti in a decommissioned Australian jail – work that carries parallels with our own. She suggests graffiti carries different performative functions for men and women; asserting power and reaffirming identity for men, expressing and building alliances for women. The characteristics of men and women's carceral journeys, with men more likely to be moved to other facilities, may mean graffiti carries different functions to meet differing needs. Analysing prisoners' poetry, DeValiant *et al*. (2018) note repeated references to mirrors and suggest this indicates the exploration of the self, making the self and relationship to others visible. Poetry offers a means of self-reflection in a setting that seeks to curtail it (Shepherd and Lenton, 2016). Expanding upon this work, we consider how women's interactions with carceral spaces, through practices such as graffiti, not only speaks to relationships with self and others, but a relationship to the institution itself. We consider how material modifications draw attention to the prison's inadequacies and contradictions, forming material tactics of resistance that implicitly carry the risk of further punishment.

These studies demonstrate how spatial interactions shape experiences of incarceration. Focusing on the everyday communicates how prison spaces, practices of punishment, power relations and identities are established, and carceral boundaries maintained or transgressed (Turner, 2016). Official materials establish and enforce roles, responsibilities and behaviours, positioning the prison as an industry with consumers and providers (Bosworth, 2007). Everyday practices that establish relationships and affirm identities, such as collecting (Baer,



2004), graffiti (Wilson, 2008) and poetry (De Valliant *et al.* 2018) can operate as tactics that trouble this managerial discourse. Whilst carceral spaces are undoubtedly sites of power where the prison regime dictates the possibilities for how women live, tactics of survival and resistance challenge power and authority, reasserting autonomy and agency. However momentary and situated, such tactics demonstrate how carceral spaces are precarious and movable, contingent on relational, emotional and material dynamics. However, the limited methods and opportunities for resistance serve to highlight the system's physical and ideological dominance and rigidity. The prison system's foundation on implicit and explicit practices of control and punishment limits the possibilities for resistance because of the ever-present threat of further punishment. We argue that it is essential to hold this troubled relationship in mind when reading images that document moments of resistance.

**Methodology: tracing flashes of insight**

Photographs of Holloway were taken post-closure by Roz Currie, curator at Islington Museum<sup>iv</sup>, giving a sense of its size and detail. Our research focus is on women's everyday lives, resistance and survival in the prison. For this reason, we selected photographs from the archive that showed the objects women would have interacted with on a daily basis, as well as the traces they left on the space. Following a thematic analysis, these images were then divided into two categories: everyday objects (beds, sinks, mirrors etc.) and women's modification of the space. We deliberately selected photos that we expect to have everyday resonance for the viewer. We seek to offer a disruptive reading by setting out a framework of interpretation that asks the viewer to notice objects and arrangements familiar to the home and the prison. We do so in order to harness the immediate affective power of the images in order to bring the strangeness of living a life in these conditions into focus.

Here, we discuss four photographs illustrative of both categories, chosen because they affected us, staying with us after viewing. In this work we aim to show how starting with an emotional engagement with the prison can generate readings that disrupt its legitimacy. In order to do so it is necessary to start with our own emotions and therefore it is essential to choose photographs that affected us and stayed with us. We recognise that this is a necessarily subjective approach and that other researchers most likely have selected different photographs to discuss. However, we feel this is methodologically defensible because our

affective connection generates the reading. The disregard for the emotional experience of imprisonment and focus instead on the work of social containment is part of what sustains the prison system. Therefore, taking emotion and care as a starting point for our methodological and analytical work is one way of challenging and disrupting these punitive orthodoxies. This approach resonates with the principles of facet methodology (Mason, 2011), which attends to the multi-dimensionality of the lived world and connections between different facets of experience. It values ‘flashes of insight’: moments that unsettle, excite, or provoke and demand ‘*imaginative, inventive, creative and intuitive reasoning*’ (Mason, 2011:80, italics in original). Facet methodology guides a form of enquiry that asks what emotional responses, imaginative leaps and intuitive reasoning can communicate, rather than providing concrete methodological steps. As Mason (2011:80) suggests ‘sometimes it is the smallest facets that create particularly intense lights and colour’: focusing on four photographs, we consider these ‘flashes of insight’ in detail. Facet methodology allows us to trouble the naturalisation of incarceration and disrupt dominant government and media narratives of Holloway’s closure by following traces, senses, and feelings as a way of looking differently. In considering what these fragments of Holloway communicate, we contribute to the ‘cargo of knowledge’ (Smart, 2014) being curated about Holloway, through archival, artistic and activist work.

Our ethical approach was guided by the principles of reflexivity, care, and sensitivity to emotion and power dynamics. We recognise we have not experienced imprisonment and offer readings marked by our distance from carceral spaces. That the photographs were taken post-closure, marked by the absence of women and their possessions, exacerbates this distance. We redress the absence of incarcerated women’s voices with a second phase of research incorporating narrative interviews and focus groups. Here we consider what the photographs communicate, offering a reading that situates them within social practices of punishment (Kuhn, 1995). These photographs confront us with often hidden spaces and practices of imprisonment. Our reading insists that we question our relationship to these; this is the power and value they hold and we contribute this ‘facet’ to Holloway’s story.

Work concerned with sites of incarceration risks being subsumed by ‘dark tourism’ – the representation of ‘death, disaster or atrocity for pedagogical and commercial purposes’ (Walby and Piché, 2011:452, cited in Turner, 2016:99). Transforming sites of pain into sites of voyeurism and entertainment is a phenomenon with a long history (Turner, 2016).

Numerous decommissioned carceral sites are now visitor attractions, reinforcing cultures of punishment (Turner, 2013; 2016; Barton and Brown, 2015). As Turner (2016:40) argues, ‘The everyday processes of locking people up, and the routine segregation that it entails, have rendered incarceration a banal practice’. Rather than contributing to a ‘dark tourism’ that cements punitive regimes, we question the logic of incarceration. Looking at photographs that capture traces of the everyday, we aim to collapse the space between the cultural imagination of imprisonment and its lived reality. There is always a risk of these photographs reinforcing or cementing punitive and stereotypical views of women in prison. We cannot control or dictate other’s responses to the photographs, but offer a reading that asks viewers to consider a feminist, anti-carceral position. We confront ourselves and others with Holloway’s everyday to contest the notion of prison as an apolitical site of fascination.

**Analysis: Familiarity and strangeness in the everyday**

Here we consider the ‘flashes of insight’ (Mason, 2011) generated when viewing four photographs. The first two show vessels and cutlery (fig. 1), and beds (fig. 2). These communicate the restrictions women face even in meeting the most basic needs of eating and sleeping, illustrating how prison boundaries are drawn through everyday objects and embodied activities. The second two (fig. 3 & 4) document women’s modification of the environment. Here everyday objects that appear slightly out of place illuminate the strangeness of the prison and practices of imprisonment, functioning as a tactic of resistance (Baer, 2004). In describing the familiarity and strangeness the photographs evoke for us, we invite readers to consider how power operates in the prison and how resistance can be traced through women’s interaction with the environment.

The photographs document everyday spaces and objects; they are in many ways unremarkable, recognisable and embedded in our everyday, yet look strange to us as women without experience of imprisonment. We were confronted with their familiarity and the strangeness of seeing them in unfamiliar conditions and through our reading aim to make these objects strange and uncomfortable to others. These objects form moments of connectedness *and* distance – we all eat and sleep, but possibilities for determining how are more expansive for many outside prison. The jarring familiarity and strangeness we felt in viewing these photographs highlighted the proximity and distance between inside and

outside, imprisoned and free<sup>v</sup>, reminding us imprisoned lives are often hidden, or made visible through voyeuristic fascination. As Novek (2006:376) observes, we are increasingly ‘entertained by stories about confinement’; imprisoned lives are often understood through contradictory media depictions of ‘holiday camps’, or violent institutions (Marsh, 2009). In viewing, we sit with the tension between familiarity and strangeness. This sense of strangeness is evoked through our own positioning that shapes our viewing, having not experienced imprisonment, or the poverty, precarious housing, or criminalisation known by many imprisoned women.

*Everyday practices of confinement: eating and sleeping*



Fig 1: Vessels and cutlery, collected by Islington Museum (Image: Rachel Seoighe)



Fig 2. Beds in a five-person cell, Holloway Prison (image: Roz currie)

These objects highlight the boundaries between imprisoned and free. The plastic vessels and cutlery were particularly instrumental in illuminating this difference. They unsettled us as we considered how it might *feel* to use them, to eat with and share them. Were they part of moments of sociality, tension, calm, excitement or mundanity? What rituals were built around them? When we handled the objects, the plastic felt infantilising and unhygienic, bearing marks of usage across time. Domestic objects contain the histories and stories of previous owners (Hurdley, 2013) and these held many women's experiences of incarceration. In their ordinariness these plastic objects forged a point of connection between our lives and those of the women who used them, allowing for our own uncomfortable and incomplete 'imaginative leap' (Smart, 2014) into everyday experiences of incarceration. Ahmed (2004:10) situates emotions as boundary markers: 'it is through emotions, or how we respond to objects and others, that surfaces or boundaries are made: the 'I' and the 'we' are shaped by, and even take the shape of, contact with others.'. The sense of familiarity and strangeness generated by our encounter with the vessels and cutlery marked boundaries between inside/outside and imprisoned/free. We can imagine ourselves eating with them, because of an experience shared on some levels, but they also highlight the divisions between (some) free and imprisoned women.

To legitimise and normalise the prison system, its everyday is made invisible and

subsumed by a focus on the standard justifications of retribution, deterrence and rehabilitation. Acceptance of it depends on the assumption that it is the only reasonable means of responding to social problems and is essential to social justice. This relies on the belief that the removal of imprisoned individuals from society is necessary for the maintenance of ‘social order’. These objects are simultaneously recognisable as part of our everyday lives and far removed from them. They are active in the function of the prison, forming part of its boundary by illuminating the societal distinction made between incarcerated and free (Turner, 2016), between those ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ of comfort, security, choice and freedom.

Metal-framed beds (fig. 2) confront us with the institutional nature of where women slept, particularly when devoid of mattresses or blankets to provide warmth or comfort. Idealised notions of beds as places of comfort, warmth, security, intimacy and rest, sit in stark contrast to this photograph. Beds are also, of course, associated with feelings of fear, shame or abuse and cannot be afforded static meaning. However, as Hill (1991) documents in his ethnography with homeless women, a ‘comfy bed’ is considered one of the basic needs in a secure home. Beds might, therefore, be *imagined* as comfortable and secure, even if they are not always *experienced* as such. The contrast between what we imagine beds to be, and our own experience of the reliability of a comfy bed, and the viewing of these metal frames, that these objects communicate something of how the prison dictates and regulates embodied experiences of comfort, privacy and intimacy.

The beds are bolted to the floor and cannot be moved to achieve desired levels of warmth, light, privacy, or intimacy. The shape and size of the frames are akin to a child’s bed, inevitably restricting the occupant’s ability to stretch, roll over and change position. Possibilities for movement are shaped by the objects and spaces the women live with. Ahmed (2017:22) argues that encounters with violence (individual, structural, institutional) leave a sensation ‘often felt by the skin’; an embodied and emotional register of wrongdoing. Violence has embodied effects: ‘You begin to expect it. You learn to inhabit your body differently through this expectation’ (Ahmed, 2017:24). This notion of ‘sensing wrongs’ describes how the everyday violence of the institution, enacted through the removal of choice and freedom and the subtle meanness of the environment, might be written onto the body.



Looking at these photographs elicited an embodied response: tensing up, drawing in shoulders and legs, making ourselves smaller, braced for those narrow, uncomfortable beds. We imagined the small, embodied adjustments required for sleeping and how these might be assimilated into everyday movement around the institution. These adjustments respond to institutional inadequacies and a lack of control over everyday activities like sleeping and eating, illustrating the embodied nature of punishment (Chamberlen, 2018). Institutional spaces are written onto women's bodies through the meanness of the objects they live with. Subtle pains and discomforts communicate the punitive restriction of dignity as well as freedom.

Considering the numbers of incarcerated women with experience of homelessness or poverty (Cain, 2018; PRT, 2015), these objects might also symbolise reliability and safety. Mayock and Sheridan (2013) spoke to women with histories of homelessness and incarceration who reported that prison provided a sense of safety and security not experienced in hostels. Beds that appear so austere, uncomfortable and childlike, may provide a rare place of comfort and security. Plastic vessels and cutlery might signal a reliable meal. That these objects appear so uninviting and austere to us reflects our viewing position – as women with no experience of imprisonment or homelessness and whose notions of comfort and security emerge from a place of being relatively comfortable and secure. Rising levels of homelessness and poverty can mean that prison is experienced as more comfortable than the discomfort of life outside (Mayock and Sheridan, 2013). Imagining these objects as ones that provide comfort only emphasises the limited support available outside of prison, where services are operating under increased pressure and funding restraints.

Punishment and Society

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*Modifying carceral spaces: power, humour and agency*



Fig. 3 Sanitary towels covering air vent – (Image: Roz Currie)



Fig 4. Emergency alarm 'Room Service' graffiti (Image: Roz Currie)

Figures 3 & 4 illustrate how the tension between familiarity and strangeness is highlighted by women's interaction with and modification of the environment. They illustrate 'tactics' (Baer, 2004) that challenge or expose institutional power. Figure 3 does this by bringing into view that which is often kept hidden, figure 4 by reimagining the prison environment through humour.

Figure 3. shows prison issue sanitary towels blocking an air vent. There were numerous examples of different materials being repurposed to make toilets, lights, air vents etc. more comfortable. However, the use of sanitary products highlights the prison's inadequacies and the lack of choice afforded to women regarding their menstrual needs, owing to the forced intimacy and lack of privacy embedded in the prison environment. They also signal women's creative and inventive responses to this. A wide array of sanitary products are available outside of prison to those who can afford them and are an often-hidden aspect of poverty for those who cannot. In Holloway, the prison issue sanitary products seen in the photograph were freely available, with other available to buy<sup>vi</sup>. The uniformity of standard provision, illustrated by the rows of identical towels, ignores women's varied requirements during menstruation – differing duration, flow, anatomy and preference – that necessitate different products. The inadequacies of these products is another example of the violation of the dignity of imprisoned women and illustrates how punishment is embodied in the most intimate ways.

O'Keefe (2006:537) observes that histories of shame and stigma attached to menstruation have relegated it to the private realm, with sanitary products 'designed to be undetectable'. O'Keefe (2006:538) argues that this problematic relegation of menstruation to the private 'allowed it to become an area of vulnerability for women in a powerless position', noting how sanitary products are withheld or made visible in carceral spaces to shame and humiliate. Smith (2009:11) observed a shift in imprisoned women's experience of menstruation, from a concealed, private event, to one that is shaped by institutional demands and cannot be hidden, even if desired, resulting in a 'lack of bodily privacy [and] personal control'. The changing experience of menstruation and the way the prison environment can necessitate the public display of private experiences, is communicated through this photograph. However, it also signals an inventive repurposing of materials that challenges the stigmatisation of menstruation.

O’Keefe (2006) considers how women use the menstrual taboo as a tactic of resistance, playing on the stigma and shame perpetuated by society. She notes that the 1980 ‘dirty protests’ of women imprisoned in Armagh jail included the smearing of menstrual blood on cell walls. The women’s protests transgressed cultural taboos and were considered more shocking and disgusting than men’s. Smith (2009) similarly notes that women used menstrual taboos to assert power; deliberately embarrassing male guards by asking for sanitary products. These accounts offer an alternative reading of the display of sanitary products as a source of embarrassment, shame, or forced intimacy, but rather as an assertion of power and resistance. Other materials used to cover air-vents, spy-holes or harsh lighting similarly speak to the limited but creative ways imprisoned women might assert control over their environment. However, the sanitary towels illustrate how the demands of women’s bodies create possibilities, albeit limited, for remaking the prison environment and for a proactive, creative response to its inadequacies. The use of sanitary towels as a tactic of resistance to and exposure of the inadequacies of the prison are intimately connected to the rhythms and demands of women’s bodies.

The final photograph (fig. 4) depicts a cell emergency alarm with ‘ROOM SERVICE!’ graffitied above it. It is a humorous act of resistance that highlights imprisoned women’s distance from possibilities available (to some) outside of the prison. The graffiti highlights the disjuncture between outside and inside, the lack of autonomy, comfort and freedom available to imprisoned women, reminding us of the intimate and everyday ways in which prison exerts its punishment. This graffiti resists the ‘holiday camp’ (Marsh, 2009) narrative by highlighting what this alarm will not do – summon the comfort, indulgence and luxury of room service and award the privilege of nourishing and pleasuring the body.

Bosworth (1999) has argued that imprisoned women’s resistance often consists of small acts that assert a subjective identity and highlight the connection between everyday and structural inequalities (Bosworth and Carrabine, 2001). Here, humour is used to comment upon the institution and its distance from possibilities available (to some) outside. The boundaries between inside and outside are played with and commented upon. As Hughes (2016) notes, in Foucauldian terms, to resist is to activate, or create something ‘as inventive and mobile’ as power itself. Hughes suggests it is the unknowability of the creative process and what a creative act might do that generates possibilities for resistance. Whilst the

intention in writing cannot be known, the graffiti – a subversive, creative intervention – communicates resistance in viewing by highlighting the dissonance between inside and outside and challenging the ‘holiday camp’ narrative.

There are numerous examples of cell modification and graffitied messages of resistance or advice in the photographs. This repetition suggest the material modifications contribute to a shared knowledge of survival tactics. As Hurdley (2013) suggests, personal and domestic objects and spaces are shaped by past contact and contain others’ histories and stories. Repurposed materials and graffiti communicate strategies for survival, comfort and control. Women’s interaction with and modification of the prison produces a collective memory of how to make the carceral space more liveable. Graffiti sends messages of support and advice from one woman to another and the repurposing of sanitary towels and other materials communicates survival tactics. These photographs illustrate the many ways Holloway can be understood as a lived, mobile site.

### **Conclusions: domestic points of view**

Our reading of photographs of HMP Holloway post-closure, considers what the sense of familiarity and strangeness they evoke contributes to the ‘cargo of knowledge’ (Smart, 2014) being curated about Holloway. We viewed and handled vessels, cutlery and beds – everyday objects – with discomfort and unease. These objects signal the lack of control and autonomy afforded to incarcerated individuals and highlight how practices of punishment operate through the everyday. They illustrate how strategies of control are experienced through the body, determining how women eat and sleep (Chamberlen, 2018). The photographs document women’s modification of space, demonstrating how the demands of the prison make objects such as sanitary towels visible, challenging the secrecy and stigma that can surround them. In making the unseen seen and highlighting the disjuncture between inside and out through humour – the photographs illustrates how women expose institutional inadequacies and their modifications operate as a form of resistance. We argue, firstly, that practices of imprisonment are enacted through the subtle management and restriction of everyday, embodied activities, such as eating and sleeping. The sense of familiarity and strangeness experienced upon viewing these photographs illuminates everyday practices of punishment that can easily be ignored by those with distance from carceral spaces. Secondly, women’s interaction with the prison environment form geographies of resistance that

challenge the prison's material inadequacies, whilst forcing the viewer to consider how the removal of choice, comfort and dignity is continually naturalised and reinforced.

As this article is concerned with our reactions to the photographs, it is important to consider our viewing position and how we understand and experience these objects. These photographs document objects formative of everyday life – beds, cutlery, sanitary products – ones that are embedded in our lives and routines and that we might most readily associate with home. Domestic objects carry and produce meaning that exceed their use value, conveying status, style and taste to the outside world (Baudrillard, 1981). Domestic objects tell stories, do emotional and relational work, and are given meaning shaped by associations with family, gender, race and class (Woodward, 2006). The significance of these objects in the home, the decision to put them on display or hide them from view, the activities that take place in or with these objects and the rituals and meanings built around them, are part of our identity work (Hurdley, 2013). Viewing them in a carceral context reminds us of how easily we take for granted having control over them in our homes.

The feelings these objects generate in viewing must be understood in relation to their associations with home and what we imagine these objects to be, do, or signify in our own lives. It is in the objects' associations with domesticity<sup>vii</sup>, but more precisely in our assumption that we have control over how we use or display them, that their strangeness in the institutional environment becomes so apparent, whilst revealing our own privileged positions. Familiar objects are transformed into something strange – narrow beds, plastic bowls, plates and cutlery, repurposed sanitary towels – when they bear the marks of the institution. That this transformation is strange to us highlights that we are women viewing objects used by other(ed) women to survive an experience we have not had. But it is the sense of unease, of strangeness, that means these photographs have the power to communicate the pains of incarceration and subtle practices of punishment.

It is this transformation of everyday objects that artist Hannah Hull conveys in her poetry inspired by Holloway. Here Hull writes about the repurposed sanitary towels:

What you see is not what I see,

In here, things lose their meaning,



Become raw material.

Comfort-giving potential to exploit.

What you see is not what I see.

Anymore.

(Hull, Echoes, 2018)

It is in viewing the photographs and handling these objects from a position of relative comfort and security that makes the small, everyday pains of imprisonment, the mundanities of punishment and the restrictions placed on imprisoned women's lives so stark. Hull's poem also speaks to our de-carceral aims: spending time with the familiarity and strangeness this viewing evokes demands that we look differently at these objects (Mason, 2011).

Entering an institution often seen as impenetrable and documenting what is left behind offers a form of boundary crossing (Turner, 2016). In looking at these photographs we see some of the ways in which women attempt to survive incarceration. This is just one layer of Holloway's story; we are not claiming to voice women's experience of Holloway, but ask what we can learn by attending to our own discomfort in viewing and how this might complicate the dominant narrative of Holloway's closure.

Whilst the media coverage of Holloway's closure was concerned with its salacious and provocative history, photographs of the emptied building demand that we think about the effect of this carceral space on the many women inhabitants whose names are not known to the media. Jones et al (2012:pg) remind us that it should not only be the extraordinary that is made visible: 'presence ought not be reduced to the spectacular, for the spectacular serves to emphasise extraordinary acts, not banal occurrences'. With our reading of the everyday mundanities of incarceration, through familiar, domestic objects, we aim to make it difficult for viewers to push practices of punishment to the periphery and ignore the experience of imprisonment. The story of Holloway should not be one of binary understanding of old and new, or narratives of progress and reform, but of the everyday, lived experience of incarceration that forces us to consider how imprisonment is normalised.

The collaborative nature of this research, which brings sociological, criminological, heritage and artistic perspectives into conversation, and that draws on creative methods,

offers a unique perspective that can puncture and disrupt media and government narratives of Holloway's closure. Collaborative, creative anti-carceral scholarship has the potential to create societal impact by intervening in the sociological imagination of incarceration in the UK and globally. One way it can do this is by simply inviting others, through our analysis, to look differently and consider what feels strange about everyday practices of punishment.

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<sup>i</sup> We explore this policy in forthcoming work on the practices of peripheral punishment that Holloway's closure is emblematic of. This is just one more example of how Holloway has come to symbolise and been subject to changing carceral regimes and ideologies across its history (Rock, 1996).

<sup>ii</sup> Financial difficulties are leading underlying factors in women's offending (LA PCC, 2018). Fifteen percent of people entering prison in 2012 were homeless, compared to 4% of the general population (PRT, 2015). In Holloway's final year, around 19% of women arriving were in non-permanent accommodation, with 10% street homeless (Cain, 2018).

<sup>iii</sup> Particularly for minoritised women, whose treatment by criminal justice representatives has been found to be more aggressive and punitive (Chigwada-Bailey, 2003; Devlin, 1998; Farrant, 2009; Jolliffe & Haque, 2017). An intersectional analysis acknowledges how 'different forms of oppression can lead to an amplification of discrimination at each stage of the criminal justice system' (Farrant, 2009). Race is difficult to consider here, but we recognise that minority ethnic women, particularly black women, are overrepresented in the criminal justice system, reproducing entangled oppressions experienced in society, exacerbated by austerity policies (Bassel and Emejulu, 2017).

<sup>iv</sup> These photographs were taken by the curator of Islington Museum for their *Echoes of Holloway* exhibition in 2016, shortly after Holloway's closure. The curator took up to 1000 photographs of the prison building and its surroundings. The museum project was funded by Heritage Lottery Fund – the photographs were taken primarily for the purpose of an exhibition and archive and we were given access to these as researchers.

<sup>v</sup> There is a wealth of literature (Massey, 1994; Rose, 1993; Valentine, 2001) on the materialities of public/private spaces that we cannot engage with fully, but that is influential on our thinking.

<sup>vi</sup> Chamberlen (2018) argues that consumer practices in prison offer a form of 'negative freedom', where women consume as a mechanism of coping and control.

<sup>vii</sup> An extensive body of literature explores how subject positions are shaped by domesticity and home (e.g. Blunt and Dowling, 2006; Cook, 2014; Hurdley, 2013). It is not possible to engage with this here, we recognise that the domestic is one space against which carceral spaces are positioned.

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