

BOOK REVIEW

Gema Varona Martínez (ed.), *Arte en prisión: justicia restaurativa a través de proyectos artísticos y narrativos* (*Art in prison: restorative justice through artistic and narrative projects*). Valencia: Tirant lo Blanch, 2020, 480 pp., ISBN: 978-841336826-9 (pbk)

Through *Art in prison: restorative justice through artistic and narrative projects*, Gema Varona Martínez offers a bouquet of experiences that bring together the human realities within prisons and transformative aspirations regarding confinement, art and restorative justice. Some of these experiences are narrated in English, some in Spanish and one in both languages. By the end of the book, Varona Martínez talks about arts, prisons and restorative justice as travelling concepts: would restorative justice be a form of art in itself? It is interesting to explore how to ensure the methodological consistency and ethical rigor of restorative justice through art forms of expression. Through art, this ethical commitment can be more explicit about our shared humanity and cultural diversity. Art plays a major role. She mentions how ‘art in prison is perturbing, it does not bring mere calm, and it means creating from the inside to the outside of objects, walls, and embodied experiences’ (Benjamin, 2015: 54, quoted by Varona Martínez, 2020: 468). This compilation not only puts together these three universes but does so by considering the concrete walls and bodies, as well as the ghosts of the spoken and unspoken, the beautiful, the sinister and the baffling. That is what happens when we come close to violence, pain and human dignity in the most invisible spheres, where the ‘deserving’ of compassion and restoration are questioned and the healing and pleasures of the arts might seem like a luxury (unless they follow a utilitarian justification).

The book is arranged in six sections. Section 1, which includes Chapters 1 to 4, focuses on meta-narratives. In Chapter 1, Brunilda Pali talks about how visual images find themselves limited to a broader context in which the dominant meanings are so intertwined with justice. Alternative meanings and perspectives get swallowed, and that is where art in prisons, I would say, has the possibility of surviving by embracing restorative justice, by becoming explicit on engaging a multiplicity of senses that require ‘proximity rather than distance, engagement rather than detachment, intersubjectivity rather than objectivity, movement rather than non-movement and revalorisation of time over space’ (36). She emphasises the metaphor of restorative justice being on the risk of paying more attention ‘to the telescope than to the sky’ and the need to go back to a restorative imagination, with the human experience remaining at the heart. This leads to Chapter 2, in which Morrison, Woodland, Saunders and Barclay describe the experience of creating acoustic recordings that bring imprisoned women to experience relaxation through sounds related to their own deeper and shared identities. Bertagna and Mazzucato, in Chapter 3, describe how restorative justice searches for the spoken story, but some truths are unspeakable, so arts play a significant role: theatre, cinema, literature and poetry all offer an immense stock of

words and narratives. The vicarious experience of an artistic expression may offer people the necessary means to express their own 'unspeakable truths' (60). In Chapter 4, Anneke van Hoek and Annemieke Wolthuis describe experiences of storytelling in the Netherlands, Belgium and Rwanda: to tell stories is indispensable to prevent the reignition of ethnocentric violence, and it is absolutely necessary to translate academically formulated opinions to community work. Storytelling is a pathway of respect, of making real the invisible through the words and experiences of those that carry on their bodies' truths that are difficult to understand. In the first section, this collection of experiences questions the dominant narrative by inviting alternative discourses and alternative 'listening': not only how the conversation becomes ignited through images, acoustics, cinema or storytelling but also how the response is received, valued and dignified.

In Section 2, the book presents chapters that explore the meaning and purpose of punishment, as well as the ways in which art is developed by prisoners in critical forms. Within this second section, Harold Pepinsky connects mediation to intergenerational issues and a political culture of cooperation. The political and intergenerational perspective of meditation is refreshing in a modern age that individualises (and sometimes capitalises from) these practices. Pepinsky also questions how a relationship can be restored after a crime occurs, given that sometimes criminal violence takes place between people that had no prior relationship. He relies on Ruth Morris' concept of 'transforming' instead of restoring the violence that occurred. The concept of 'transformation' as a substitute for 'restorative' is not new, and I appreciated the inclusion of both to deepen the reflection. In Chapter 6, Raymond Watson refers to the Peace Walls in Belfast, and he goes as far as to claim them as ideological prisons as in how 'concrete dividing walls are a manifestation of the mind based prisons of belief systems that whole communities still inhabit' (132). According to Watson, mental beliefs and identities are barriers that limit communities from their interpretations of the world. It is a heartbreaking statement, and he acknowledges it: 'if we redefined the principal tenets of our lives, would we still be comfortable with our personal experiences and the horror of our turbulent history?' (142). Although this chapter is located in Section 2, it is quite a metanarrative challenge, in my opinion, deserving of Section 1. In Chapter 7, Nicola Valentino presents *Arte Ir-Ritata*, about how a critical moment in the person's social life pushes them to create a different narration of themselves: it is a creation of a new sense of self, and in the context of prisons it is also a lifeline. A woman mentioned in the chapter expressed that writing was about combating the boredom of the day, to live within an asylum with no exit and finding the exit by expressing the memories of her days.

Section 3 focuses on the possibilities of restorative artmaking in prisons, going from Chapters 8 to 14. In Chapter 8, Aldington, Wallace and Bilby refer to the co-creation of an artefact for restorative justice, the inclusion of artmaking and the reconstruction of the restorative lexicon. All of these practices symbolise solidarity and cultural relevance. In Chapter 9, Annie Buckley explores the benefits of arts' education on incarcerated individuals. She reflects on how well-being is an expression of social justice. Social justice looks like creation, like joy, like dignity and pleasure. She mentions Vigotsky's concepts of social interaction: in my own

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experience, in education, we often talk about constructivism; yet this chapter brings forward the reality of the bodies and interactions necessary for learning to happen, especially when learning is not only about the development of skills but about the creation of self – self-esteem, self-efficacy, self-awareness. In Chapter 10, Tinneke Van Camp and Emma Hughes discuss the ways in which art projects with previously incarcerated people remind us all of our shared humanity. They dare to question (a dare that I personally loved) the utilitarian focus of art programmes with incarcerated populations: it is not only about preventing recidivism but also about validating the person and creating space for them to exist and share their story. It is about human dignity more than it is about ‘fixing’ them through arts. The authors present how participating in these art groups creates an alternative social self for the person and how art expositions presented to the larger community are important. An exposition of art created in prison makes the confined population – often invisible, often forgotten – real, connected and existing to the outside world. By having their art witnessed, they are again connected to the outside. In Chapter 11, Katerina Soulou relates to the avant-garde movement with experimental theatre and Theater of the Oppressed. Although she does not mention it, I could not help thinking about psychodrama reflected on their practices and how to connect these experiences that bring together body, emotion, story and imagination. I remembered the Latin American experience of Restorative Theatre,¹ which also stemmed from Boal’s Theater of the Oppressed, like Soulou’s experience in France. The process by which these women went through different theatrical experiences makes evident how arts, from a restorative perspective, and within prisons, exist by building a sense of community. In Chapter 12, Teresa Sousa describes her analysis of art and restorative justice in the Ibaiondo Educational Center. She brings forward the complexity of how the early developmental stages of the confined kids influence their processes of accountability. I could not help but feel her struggle with the temptation to diagnose and reach hasty conclusions by overinterpreting the criminal history of the youth, perhaps seeking to understand. In Chapter 13, Mónica Sáenz and Carlos Romera talk about the alchemistic process of creating new narratives: arts become a process of creating something on the outside while simultaneously recreating themselves on the inside. The experiences presented are powerful, and I felt that the authors trusted the depth and importance of the works they presented so that they felt no need for further explanations. The authors recognise this by closing their chapter with ‘let each person draw their own conclusions’: an engaging conclusion to an insightful narration. In Chapter 14, Lourdes Fernández Manzano presents the programme Bridges to Life. This chapter is comprehensive about the programme, looking to self-reflect and respectfully question their religious values, history and principles, while also presenting its gifts. It would have been interesting to include a comparison with other similar experiences or programmes around the world, given that Bridges to Life is not a

1 *Teatro Restaurativo*: www.facebook.com/Teatro-Restaurativo-527977987373156/ or <https://sabiduriascolectivas.org/empoderamiento-comunitario/teatro-restaurativo-el-arte-de-cultivar-comunidad/> (last accessed 5 September 2022).

new programme and this chapter is not the first opportunity for it to become better known. Yet, for someone new to this experience, it might be a valuable discovery.

Section 4 focuses on the emerging restorative projects inside and outside of prison through music and poetry. In Chapter 15, Leire Padilla presents musical programmes in prison, including the programmes Beats and Bars and Drumbeat. These programmes connect music to self-esteem, self-efficacy, autonomy and humanity, supporting both psychological well-being and education. Chapter 16, on gender violence through a song, took me by surprise: written by Rocío Redondo Almandoz and Francisco José Ríos-López, the musical piece was composed by someone sensitised to the phenomenon as a witness of the media coverage but not by someone who experienced it directly. I struggle with the idea of a guitar as an object, symbolising the woman, and the player symbolising the man. I believe the authors are probably aware of the sensitivity of the issue by recommending mediation instead of restorative justice, as a mechanism to deal with this phenomenon, but it seemed to me like a chapter oriented to focus on the art piece more than on the impacted community. In Chapter 17, Jorge Ollero Perán focuses on feminist poetry as a way to open healing spaces. The selection of the artist Isabel Martín Ruíz resonates with the restorative intention; the chapter is theoretically well constructed and puts the people harmed at the heart of the narrative while raising fantastic questions, such as how to address the role of the community-victimiser, how to prevent harm, recidivism and how to ensure safety.

Section 5 of the book presents a critical thinking of the criminal justice system from the standpoints of politics, aesthetics and ethics. In Chapter 18, Jaseff Raziel Yauri-Miranda presents the issue of forgiveness and self-forgiveness. The author questions the economy of forgiveness, understood as a transaction. This is a necessary continuous conversation in restorative justice spaces. The author goes on to explore Hannah Arendt's take on accountability and the experiences of deliberative democracy. This reminded me of the recent book by Camila Vergara, *Systemic corruption*, where she encourages the importance of deliberative agency within the diverse assembly of assemblies (Vergara, 2020). I find these reflections intrinsically restorative and socially transformative. The author also explores the philosophy of time as fluid, and the past as subject to potential reconstruction, as well as the recreation of time and beauty as a way to resist the sinister. It is a philosophically deep chapter, and it presents a social obligation to reflect on these matters so they are accessible to all. This means the reconfiguration of a new political imaginary, which reminded me of Judith Butler's commitment to the creation of a radical equality by imagining new political scenarios that are yet to exist (Butler, 2021). In Chapter 19, Alberto José Olalde brings humour to the table: he laughs with people, even if they are the ones that have done tremendous harm, because he continues to recognise them as human. He sees humour in restorative justice as an act of love, compassion, strength-based observation, fearlessness, understanding, looking for connection, and, yes, as confronting. He presents the acronym RIA (the word in Spanish *ría* would be something like 'you laugh'): *respeto* (respect), *inocencia* (innocence) and *autenticidad* (authenticity). Finally, Chapter 20, presented both in Spanish and in English, describes the methodology developed by Alex Carrascosa to create inter-stories with the prison population in Bolivia. The

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author is generous in sharing pictures and detailed instructions on how the experience is co-created through plastic arts, dialogues and timelines. This chapter is reflective on how the methodology presented is not meant to be static but continues to evolve. He also encourages the commitment of (Freire's) critical transitivity: the recognition of individual stories and how they relate to the social contexts in which they are embedded. It also brings up the fluidity of past, present and future through the intersubjective processes of co-creating stories in community.

Section 6 consists of only one chapter about the potential applications of restorative justice to the experience of suicide in prison. Leire Izaguirre García, in Chapter 21, advocates for a phenomenon that is very little spoken of, yet tremendously impactful: not only is suicide a taboo, but suicide in prison – and its higher incidence in the first stages of deprivation of liberty – is a subject that the prison community has no space to address. The impact that this phenomenon has on the carceral community is explored, and Izaguirre discusses how the arts could become pathways to assimilate grief, to offer attention to survivors, and, simultaneously, to create opportunities of suicide prevention in the prison population. Her reflections are still exploratory and aspirational; however, they resonate with me as brave given the multiple taboos that surround this profound pain.

The book closes with Gema Varona Martínez reflecting on art as simultaneously 'an activating art and a pacifying culture' and how we, as a community, should continue to unpack this challenge of incorporating art in the construction of a restorative, participating culture that brings voice, engagement, activism and spaces for healing. This compilation of chapters stands on the shoulders of giants, quoting, to mention only a few among many others, Hannah Arendt, Plato, Paulo Freire, Lev Vigotsky, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Herman Hesse and a wide range of restorative pioneers and practitioners. A sensible quilt of colourful experiences knitted together by people building, creating, listening and recognising. Varona Martínez quotes Berger:

Here is where art might bring critical peace, in Berger's words: not by anesthesia or easy reassurance but by recognition and the promise that what has been experienced cannot disappear as if it had never been. Yet the promise is not a monument. (Who, still on a battlefield, wants monuments?) The promise is that language has acknowledged, has given shelter, to the experience that demanded, that cried out (Berger, 1984: 21, quoted by Varona Martínez, 2020: 466).

The experience is within walls; it cries out through art; it needs restoration and transformation. This book on prisons, arts and restorative justice presents to us a collection of experiences as an opportunity not only for the reader to broaden their perspective, but for this group of authors to continue to knit this community in a

variety of languages, experiences and perspectives that can continue to lead us to new transformations.

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References

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