**Introduction**

And you are to love those who are foreigners, for you yourselves were foreigners in Egypt.

*Deuteronomy 10:19*

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**SMORGASBORD**

Imagine yourself inside a cell.

You don’t know how you got there, or how long it’s been. In fact, you have no memories at all. But imagine yourself liking it inside the cell. It’s a good kind of cell for you.

Unbeknownst to you, you are very lucky indeed to be in that particular cell. It’s an epithelial cell inside a nose. This nose, part of a human being, is aboard a bus going through a gate. You don’t know what any of these things mean. You’re a virus, and like all viruses, you know just one thing: how to enter an epithelial cell, hijack its internal machinery, make hundreds of copies of yourself, move on to other cells, and repeat. And here you have hit the jackpot. This is a fantastic opportunity for you, as you will soon find out.

It’s getting cramped inside your cell; you’ve been multiplying like crazy in here. Pop! You and your band of brothers burst the cell’s outer membrane and spread out. A timely sneeze sends you all flying out into the air like a multitude of tiny parachutists. You don’t have much time left to exist, as the droplet you are in is rapidly evaporating.

Riding the air currents, you come across another human body. You brace yourself. This part would be terrifying, if you were the sort that could be terrified; here come the first defense lines—the skin, mucus, and stomach acid. Mucus in the new nose might trap you and try to expel you; if you are in a
mouth, swallowed, stomach acid may kill you. Even if you sail through, the host could send more troops after you: phagocytes wage war and release interferon to protect surrounding cells. If they cannot destroy you, they might raise the alarm and call the lymphocytes. These old-timers might remember your predecessors—anyone that was serious enough to bring them into the battle—intelligence that can help them fight an enemy they know. Many of your brothers will succumb. But your kind are not powerless: you can deceive and manipulate your way past the enemy’s defenses.

The spoils of this combat are magnificent. You can’t tell, but a human would know that you’ve passed through a wrought iron gate that reads “California State Prison, San Quentin—Ron Davis, Warden.” Only they can tell whether the host whose nose you were in, whose cells you luxuriated in, was wearing a khaki uniform or prison blues. They are so close to each other—just a little leap, just a short conversation, or even a few hours on a tray slid into a prison cell. You don’t care, do you, whether these cramped rooms bear memories of a petty offense or a serious one; whether this host might someday be injected with a lethal chemical, whether other humans will rejoice or tear up when they hear of his demise. What matters is this: you’re staying, because the hosts aren’t going anywhere, and you’re in the vicinity of so much potential. Your odds of finding a new host are good: potential hosts are confined together in overcrowded buildings, always indoors where you will not be assaulted by the sun’s rays. They are always close together, they sleep in the same rooms, they eat meals together in large halls. Here are showers, where you can brave the heat and stay on a surface for a while, just waiting for a touch. Here’s an inadvertent hand on the back, or perhaps a fight just broke out, or the khaki uniforms are manhandling the prison blues. No gloves, no masks, no barriers; no big leaps to make. This world is your oyster.

Behold—more hosts! New ones, ones you haven’t seen before. Such variety; a revolving door of faces, noses, mouths, lungs—some of them so worn from years behind bars that they are no match for your feats. You can already tell you’re going to thrive here. You, or others, can stay here; you can head out in a host, stop while she gets takeout on the way home, sneak back in with someone else. The feet step in, the cars roll through the gates. Sometimes, the thermometer they use to detect your presence is broken, sometimes no questions are asked, sometimes cursory answers are offered. You can’t read the penal code, you can’t tell the good guys from the bad guys, you don’t care about who’s violent and who’s nonviolent. There’s so much to do here, so many places to be. It’s a smorgasbord of opportunity.¹
This is likely not, dear reader, how you would experience a trip into San Quentin, whether as a prisoner, a prison worker, or a visitor. You would likely not see it as a place of opportunity—except, perhaps, for its attractive location on San Francisco Bay and real estate potential. No, what you might notice first would be the visual markers of transition: the gate, the guards, the inspection at the entrance, the towers. As Erving Goffman explains in *Total Institutions*, your mode of entering the prison and the rituals of your introduction would clearly communicate the rung you occupy in the prison hierarchy. Being “inside” would be markedly different from being “outside,” and much would be made of terms such as “behind the prison gate” and “behind bars.”

But the exercise is instructive. Its lesson is that the administrative, physical, and symbolic markers of the prisons might not bear the meaning or wield the power that our criminal justice and correctional systems have vested in these spaces, and that our understanding of prison spatiality is partial and flawed. This is the point of departure of *Fester*. We set out not only to bear witness to the most catastrophic medical scandal in US prison history but also to learn how viewing disease, risk, and pathology in a new way can upend the apparent firmness of the distinction between “inside” and “outside” and shed constructive light on correctional philosophies, designs, and practices. We by no means intend to trivialize the harsh realities of being in prison—quite the contrary. We argue that the COVID-19 prison disaster problematizes the assumption that outside communities are safer from the incarcerated “others” when they are behind bars than when they are in the community.

The virus, as many millions around the world learned to their detriment, is not a kind teacher. Like the Zen teachers of yore, who used to slap their disciples into enlightenment, it has wreaked death, illness, poverty, and hardship throughout the world. The gross mismanagement of the COVID-19 threat in the United States, compounded by the excesses of petulant, selfish leadership and deep pockets of noncompliance stemming from political polarization and disinformation campaigns, generated, as of February 21, 2023, 103 million infections, claimed 1.12 million lives, led to an unemployment spike that eclipsed the one resulting from the Great Recession of 2008, left countless people homeless, upended the education of millions of US children, and deepened gender, class, and race gaps by medically and economically worsening the situation of already vulnerable segments of the population.

Even against this sobering background, the horrific outbreak in San Quentin State Prison—2,239 cases and 28 deaths at a facility designed to hold 3,082 people—has stood out as the worst outbreak site in the nation.
entire California prison system has been ravaged by COVID-19: as of February 21, 2023, it has seen 91,591 infections (some of which are reinfections) and 260 deaths. Thousands of additional infections and illnesses plagued California’s county jail system. California was not unique in having a correctional COVID-19 disaster: nationwide, between the start of the pandemic and February 2023, prisons and ICE facilities reported 663,196 cases and 3,181 deaths.\textsuperscript{10} Prisons surpassed the case rate in the US population on April 14, 2020. By June 2020 the COVID-19 case rate for prisoners was 5.5 times higher than the US population case rate of 587 per 100,000; even when adjusting for age (individuals aged 65 years or older, who accounted for most deaths in the overall US population, were underrepresented in the prison population), the difference was still stark: prison mortality rates were three times higher than in the US population.\textsuperscript{11}

The staggering rate of infections and deaths in prisons generally, and in California prisons in particular, indicates that the designation of “inside” and “outside” spaces is far from meaningless. But the problem runs far deeper than mismanagement or even indifference. It stems from a basic misapprehension about the nature and function of prison boundaries, which we refer to here as the myth of prison impermeability.

THE MYTH OF PRISON IMPERMEABILITY

On May 30, 2020—three months after the global outbreak of the novel coronavirus—200 men were transferred from the California Institution for Men in Chino, which was experiencing a serious outbreak at the time, to San Quentin and Corcoran prisons. This fateful transfer would later be regarded as the cause of the horrific outbreak at San Quentin.\textsuperscript{12} Two days later, Dr. Matthew Willis, the top health officer of Marin County (home to San Quentin) contacted the warden.\textsuperscript{13} Dr. Willis expressed grave concerns about the implications of the transfer on the prison population and on the surrounding county and urged the warden to sequester the incoming population and administer COVID-19 tests. As Willis later explained in a letter to Judge Geoffrey Howard of the Marin Superior Court,\textsuperscript{14} this conversation would be the first in a series of public health recommendations to be issued and summarily dismissed by prison officials. The California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) didn’t even directly address Willis’s concerns; what they did was forward him a letter from their general counsel,
which was addressed to county officials in Kings County. Apparently, health officials there had similar concerns about the earlier outbreak in Avenal State Prison, which, months before the San Quentin outbreak, had already infected more than 1,000 people and claimed 5 lives. This outcome was already known when CDCR officials repurposed the letter and forwarded it to Willis. The letter read in relevant part, “[t]he State is not an entity under local health officers’ jurisdictions, and thus local health officer orders are not valid against the State.”

This outrageous occurrence is emblematic of an extremely common perspective among politicians, policymakers, prison administrators, and the general public, who assume prisons are largely impermeable spaces. Theoretically, the notion of prison impermeability is a simplification of Erving Goffman’s aforementioned characterization of prisons as “total institutions,” finding the prison to be “…a place of residence and work where a large number of like-situated individuals, cut off from the wider society for an appreciable length of time, together lead an enclosed, formally administered round of life.”15 The classic studies of prison culture in the 1960s and 1970s looked at the prison as a closed unit of analysis, which required enculturation to its unique norms16 and embeddedness in its endemic economy,17 and which inflicted unique forms of suffering as a consequence of its closure.18

Under the logic of prison impermeability, the only important interfaces of prison with the outside occur at the entrance (incarceration) and at the exit (reentry). Both contact points raise serious problems, which the literature has discussed in detail: on the front end, criminalization, mass plea bargaining, the impact of pretrial detention and the cash bail system, and the racially discriminatory aspects of policing and courtroom dynamics; and on the back end, lengthy sentences, exacerbated recidivism through incarceration, the stigma of criminal records, and the lack of a rehabilitation-reentry continuum. But between entry and exit, confinement is perceived as impermeable. This idea underpins the philosophy of incapacitation, widely regarded since the 1980s as the most accessible goal of punishment: put people behind bars, and they will not endanger the community.19 Thus, prisons are praised by some as spaces that incapacitate dangerous people by keeping them away from “the outside” and critiqued by others as spaces that remove people from participation in civil society (temporarily or permanently, with severe racial and class disenfranchisement implications).

While studying prison culture is a valuable endeavor, it is an oversight to do so at the exclusion of the continuities and connections between prison and
the surrounding community. Practically speaking, prison impermeability is a myth; criticizing Goffman’s framework, Keith Farrington found it to be “fairly inaccurate as a portrayal of the structure and functioning of the . . . correctional institution,” explaining that the prison “is not as completely or effectively ‘cut off from wider society’ as Goffman’s description would lead us to believe.” Dominique Moran characterizes prisons as “having a relatively stable and on-going network of transactions, exchanges and relationships which connect and bind them to their immediate host communities and to society more generally.” Indeed, the membrane between prisons and their surrounding communities is quite thin: various people (correctional officers, prison workers, volunteers, visitors, tourists), things (money, goods, factory raw material), and intangibles (tax money, critique) pass through the membrane on a daily basis. Some of these exchanges are rooted in the basic functions of prison as an institution and an economic unit; others vary based on transparency.

This model of the prison is crucial to understanding the California COVID-19 prison crisis. For this purpose, our analysis utilizes the concept of carceral permeability—a perspective on carceral space that increases the salience of continuity and flow. We view the boundary between the carceral and the noncarceral as porous and fluid, both for the purpose of understanding viral contagion and for considering issues like overcrowding and release strategies. Replacing narrow political constructions of impermeability with this holistic understanding of spatial continuity allows us not only to comprehend how the COVID-19 catastrophe was allowed to occur, but also to critique it and to offer a way forward. The concept of carceral permeability lies at the intersection of theoretical perspectives on carceral spatiality and continuity: insights from carceral geography, situational crime prevention, and the social history of disease and contagion in prisons.

PRISON AND COMMUNITIES AS A GEOGRAPHICAL CONTINUUM

Carceral geography, a field examining the spatial dimension of incarceration and confinement, is deeply influenced by Michel Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish.* In his analysis of the shift from centralized, public displays of corporal punishment toward sites of supervision and a disciplining “gaze,” Foucault coined the concept of “the carceral archipelago”—the notion that
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The distinction between the prison and the outside is not binary, and there are multiple settings of varying degrees of confinement and moral surveillance, designed to internalize notions of normality and deviance amid the surveilled population. Building on this notion of carceral gradation, Malcolm Feeley and Jonathan Simon identified the emergence of a “new penology,”23 a sequel to Foucault’s disciplinary carceral in that it incapacitates according to actuarial considerations but features the same array of gradual, continuous regimes of “selective incapacitation.”24 Other influences on carceral geography include Giorgio Agamben’s work on “bare life” and spaces of exception25 and the work of Loïc Wacquant on the continuum between the ghetto and the hypercarceral regime in the United States and Western Europe.26

The difficulty of using the term “carceral state,” as Ashley Rubin and Michelle Phelps explain, lies not only in the term’s multiple meanings but also in the simplistic suggestion that there is a single, unified, and actorless state responsible for punishment. This contradicts the thrust of recent punishment literature, which emphasizes fragmentation, variegation, and constant conflict across the actors and institutions that shape penal policy and practice.27 The use of “the carceral” by geographers overcomes this challenge through its spatial focus.

Rather than characterizing a discrete, physical location, a “carceral space,” according to geographer Dominique Moran, satisfies three necessary conditions. The first is “detriment”—a space must inflict suffering, harm, or punishment, experienced as such and regardless of intent. The second condition is that of an involuntary imposition of detriment via confinement (which would exclude, for example, choosing to confine oneself to a gated community “prison”). The third condition brings in the material, virtual, or imagined space or spaces to which these relate.28 Moran identifies three themes within carceral geography: the nature of carceral spaces and experiences within them, the spatial geographies of carceral systems, and the relationship between the carceral and an increasingly punitive state.29 All three themes problematize the idea of clear, impervious boundaries between the “carceral” and the “noncarceral,” in ways that are essential to this project.

The first theme illuminates the ways in which prison structure and architecture, as well as mobility within prison or between prisons, deeply impact carceral experiences. Prison design researchers illuminate how historical and contemporary physical plants30 reflect the institution’s philosophy and the system’s perception of its planned inhabitants.31 Moran highlights this connection between function and design by examining the “Prison Design
Boycott” launched in 2005 by Architects/Designers/Planners for Social Responsibility against the planning and construction of death chamber and supermax prisons.32 Prison ethnographies examine how incarcerated people emotionally and somatically experience carceral spaces, particularly the lack of privacy33 and the stresses and conflicts stemming from prison overcrowding.34 Special attention is paid to techniques of resistance, ranging from personalizing the space,35 through inhabiting and maintaining one’s own body,36 to the “dirty protest.”37

The second theme challenges the understanding of prisons as static and immobile. As prison geographers show, mobility is a constant feature of carcerality, be it between the prison and the outside, between prisons, or within prisons. The shape mobility takes is a key facet of what Moran describes as the “power geometry of everyday life” in carceral space,38 the freedom to move39 —and the amount of control individuals exert over the direction, medium, and conditions of their own mobility—varies greatly with the social role of the institutional inhabitant.40

The second theme highlights the oft-obscured connections between prisons and their surrounding communities.41 Many studies examine the hesitation42 of communities to reorient their economy around prisons, fearing rising crime rates,43 undesired changes in local ambience44 and infrastructure,45 and declines in property value.46 Other studies show community enthusiasm for prison siting, based on assumptions (warranted and unwarranted)47 that the prison and related industries will produce economic growth.48 Some of these important works feature Susanville, home to three California prisons and the recipient of the apt moniker “Prison Town, U.S.A.”49 Ruth Wilson Gilmore’s pioneering work *Golden Gulag*50 documents the process by which prison entrepreneurs presented prison siting within the town as an economic opportunity, and how local legislators were “sold” on the idea—even as the promise did not yield the promised local economic growth.51 Becoming a prison town, however, changes the character and cultural norms in the community,52 to the point that Karen Morin compares prison towns to cattle towns.53

The third theme offers an even broader interrogation of the “carceral space” concept. In *Prison Land,*54 Brett Story illuminates the omnipresence of the carceral state far beyond prisons, into seemingly “outside” settings such as gentrifying downtown Detroit, neighborhood politics in Brooklyn, Appalachian mined mountaintops as potential correctional settings, statewide overnight buses, spatial restrictions on sex offenders and gang
members, and electronically monitored homes. Story’s sophisticated geo-economic analysis demonstrates the superficiality of postrecession reforms: an ostensibly benevolent push for urban renewal through a tech tycoon’s purchase of downtown buildings also marginalizes and segregates poor people of color; an apparently well-meaned effort at neighborhood justice as an alternative to incarceration serves more as a public relations stunt for law enforcement than as a true solution for the problems that produce crime; and efforts to create jobs in a vanishing world of coal mining hide an underbelly of prison capacity enhancement.

Story’s book is especially valuable as a companion to her documentary The Prison in Twelve Landscapes, which depicts the carceral state without showing a single prison: here, a master chess player who learned to play in prison teaches chess in Central Park; an Appalachian town’s librarian discusses the impact of a prison escape on the town; California prisoners fight fires without any postrelease job prospects as firefighters; and warehouses in the Bronx are chock-full of goods for prisons. Story’s depiction of the “prison in-between”—the overnight buses that take visitors to remote, rural prisons—drives home the physical discomfort, expense, and time of the travelers/visitors as sacrifices that extend the realm of the carceral to the bus visit and increase the visibility of the neoliberal hand of the market, through the companies that run the buses.

Alongside Jonathan Simon’s Governing through Crime, several important works examine how the carceral experience transcends obvious criminal justice institutions and permeates schools, workplaces, and families. Wacquant’s notion of the ghetto and Davis’s notion of the “carceral city” are additional examples. These spaces are creatures not merely of the state but also of the private sector; several works examine the contribution of technological tools to the creation of invisible, but insidious and powerful, carceral spaces with racial underpinnings, such as through software for predictive policing, the racialization of surveillance in commerce, limitations on financial mobility through credit monitoring, and employing surveillance tactics, offered by loss-prevention corporations, on employees in the retail industry. Some scholars draw important analogies between different kinds of carceral spaces: Karen Morin’s provocative comparisons of prisons and factory farms shows how “[t]he process of ‘animalization’ in particular subjugates both certain humans and certain nonhumans into hierarchies of worthiness and value.” For some scholars, carcerality is a structural element of the neoliberal state, providing rationales and technologies to manage the
underclass\textsuperscript{68} or the locus for utilizing and investing surplus land, labor, and capital.\textsuperscript{69}

These studies, which refute the myth of prison impermeability, are directly relevant to COVID-19 in prisons. They highlight the immense importance of prison architecture and design to the pandemic spread and prevention strategy behind bars, making the locus of any incarcerated person a defining characteristic of their pandemic experience. The particular case of forced, botched transfers is a case in point. Carceral geography also illuminates the folly of containment strategies that assume a separation between contagion behind bars and the surrounding counties. Finally, these studies highlight the continuum of carceral spaces between “the outside” and prison, in a pandemic scenario in which the public at large experiences considerable limitations on movement and quality of life, and interrogate the implications of these quasi-carceral experiences for humanizing incarcerated people and engendering empathy for their tragic plight.

\textbf{CONTAGION, PLACE, AND OPPORTUNITY: INSIGHTS FROM SITUATIONAL CRIME PREVENTION}

Another body of literature concerned with human experiences within spatial environments is situational crime prevention (SCP), a cluster of criminological theories that focus on how physical environments impact criminal behavior. The emergence of SCP, according to criminologist David Weisburd, was the consequence of despair of grand theories, which excavated personal histories and psychological makeups of people who committed crimes to understand (in vain) the causes of their behavior.\textsuperscript{70} SCP is not agnostic, though, about human behavior: rather, it adopts a rational choice approach, whereby crime is not the manifestation of personal or social pathology but a rational response to one’s environment. One of the unique aspects of rational choice theory is the duality that David Garland referred to as “criminologies of the self” and “criminologies of the other.”\textsuperscript{71} Even where people’s situations are deeply constrained by their social and demographic circumstances, rational choice theorists are interested in the repertoire of choices they do have,\textsuperscript{72} leading some to see rational choice theory as a general theory of crime.\textsuperscript{73}

The intersection of human agency and its surrounding environs is evident in Marcus Felson and Lawrence Cohen’s routine activities theory.\textsuperscript{74} Felson and Cohen see crime as the product of three factors: an accessible target, the