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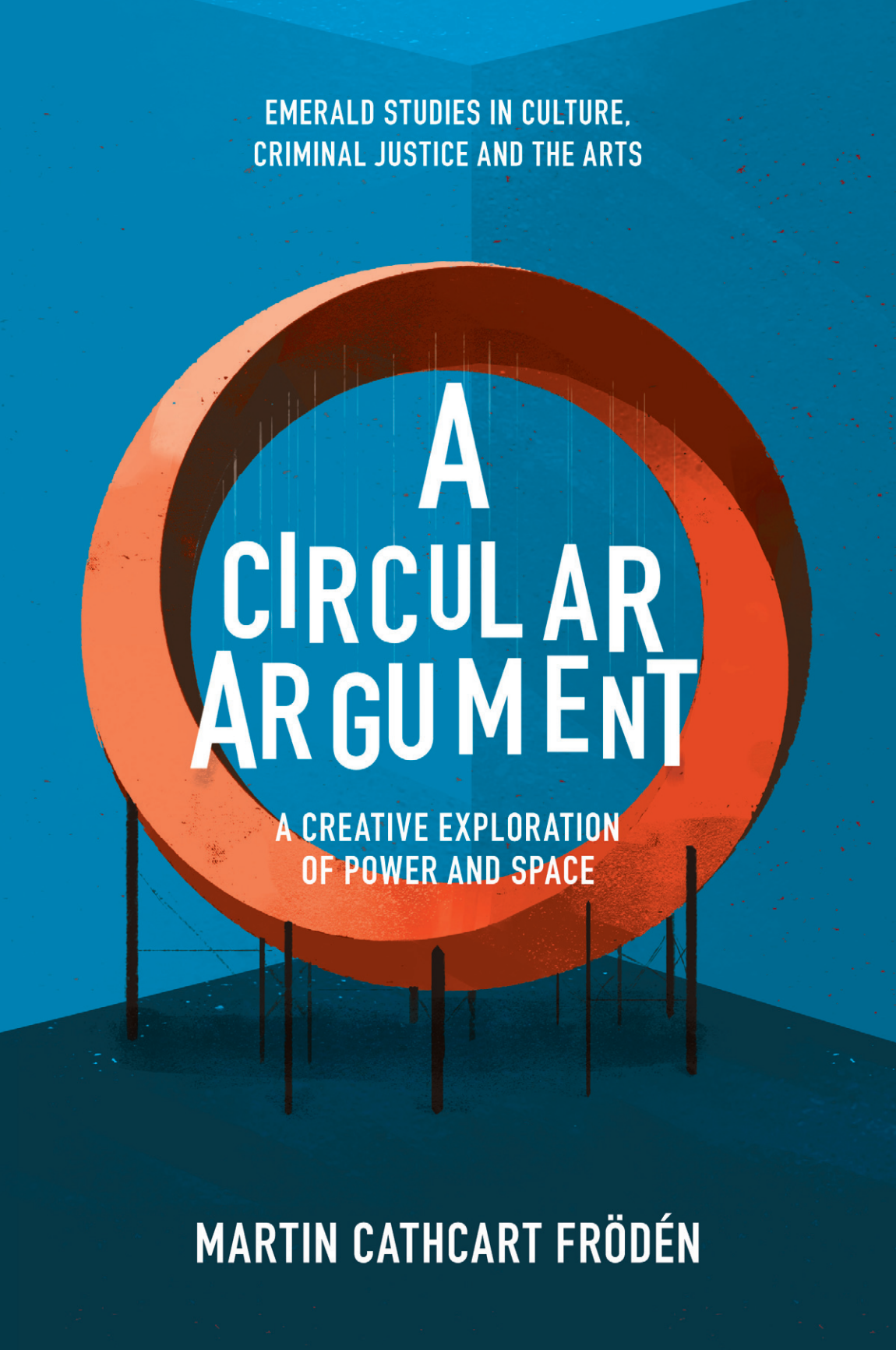

# A CIRCULAR ARGUMENT

## A CREATIVE EXPLORATION OF POWER AND SPACE

MARTIN CATHCART FRÖDÉN

# A Circular Argument

# Emerald Studies in Culture, Criminal Justice and the Arts

**Edited by**

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University of Bath, UK

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This series aims to take criminological inquiry in new and imaginative directions, by publishing books that represent all forms of criminal justice from an 'arts' or 'cultural' perspective, and that have something new to tell us about space, place and sensory experience as they relate to forms of justice. Building on emergent interest in the 'cultural', 'autoethnographic', 'emotional', 'visual', 'narrative' and 'sensory' in Criminology, books in the series will introduce readers to imaginative forms of inspiration that deepen our conceptual understanding of the lived experience of punishment and of the process of researching within the criminal justice system, as well as discussing the more well-rehearsed problems of cultural representations of justice.

Specifically, this series provides a platform for original research that explores the myriad ways in which architecture, design, aesthetics, hauntology, atmospheres, fine art, graffiti, visual broadcast media and many other 'cultural' perspectives are utilized as ways of seeing and understanding the enduring persistence of, and fascination with, the formal institutions of criminal justice and punishment.

# Praise for *A Circular Argument*

Martin Cathcart Frödén's new book will surely accelerate criminology's slow awakening to the potency and importance of imagination and creativity in rethinking crime and punishment. It deserves to be widely read and discussed by anyone and everyone who cares about the pursuit of justice.

**–Fergus McNeill, Professor of Criminology and Social Work, Associate Director, SCCJR**

Encompassing memoir, creative writing, criminology, and architecture, this unusual book is in two halves. One is a critical, multidisciplinary, autobiographical exploration of carceral space and place, time, absence and visibility, masculinities and vulnerabilities, movement and stasis, circularity and linearity. The other is a novella that explores in fiction the very same themes. The result is one of the most imaginative, ambitious, compelling, clever, and funny books I have read. It is quite simply stunning.

**–Yvonne Jewkes, Professor of Criminology, University of Bath**

Inspiring, bold and highly readable, *A Circular Argument* is a breath of fresh air in academic publishing. Employing practice as research to disrupt some of the hierarchies it examines, it offers a forward-thinking and transdisciplinary approach to spatial hierarchies with particular reference to carceral systems. Some of its most serious propositions are embedded in its gripping and entertaining narrative, proving that ideas are more effectively shared when rigour and humour go hand in hand. More of this, please – it's what we need to refresh our ways of working.

**–Dr Zoë Strachan, Reader in Creative Writing, University of Glasgow**

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# A Circular Argument: A Creative Exploration of Power and Space

BY

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United Kingdom – North America – Japan – India – Malaysia – China

Emerald Publishing Limited
Howard House, Wagon Lane, Bingley BD16 1WA, UK

First edition 2021



**British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data**
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-80071-385-7 (Print)
ISBN: 978-1-80071-382-6 (Online)
ISBN: 978-1-80071-384-0 (Epub)


ISOQAR certified Management System, awarded to Emerald for adherence to Environmental standard ISO 14001:2004.

Certificate Number 1985
ISO 14001

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# Acknowledgments*

I wish to thank Dr Zoë Strachan, Prof Johnny Rodger, and Prof Fergus McNeill for their patience, insights, and constant encouragement, as well as the SGSAH, the SCCJR in general, and the prison visiting reading group in particular. Furthermore, I wish to thank the Glasgow University Creative Writing Department for an amazing few years, as well as my colleagues at 73 Great George Street for being patient with me through the various processes this work has involved. I would like to thank criminal justice arts organization Vox Liminis, Dr David Hopes of The National Trust for Scotland, Jude Barber of Collective Architecture, and the Gillian Purvis Trust, for opportunities offered and coffees supplied.

Last but not least, I want to thank my three young children, Mika, Alma, and Elias, and my wife Lucy for their ability to ensure a work/life balance and their unwavering support over the last many moons. Tack så mycket för allt!

* This work was supported by the Arts and Humanities Research council. Grant number AH/L503915.

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# Introduction

Spanning creative writing, criminology, and architecture, this work examines some of the ways power and hierarchies can be explored and exploited in space. It is a practice-led study in two parts: one primarily creative nonfiction (A Circular Argument) and the other in the form of a novel (The Out). The main focus of the nonfiction piece is the obsession with the circular as an architectural gesture and as a concept combining containment and transparency, from the ideal planned city of the Middle Ages, via Bentham's panopticon, to the all-seeing eye of modern digital society. The creative piece explores how the complications and surprises of human interaction are bound to color and change the supposedly watertight systems of social control we design as a society – how prison architecture or national road networks might be undermined, or how the power dynamics of the class system might be temporarily suspended in a heightened situation. Forgiveness, desistance, and redemption also play a part in the narrative, for both the "guilty" and "innocent" parties. Both elements of the work also examine how time moves differently inside from outside of the prison walls, and the limited success of trying to build away social problems.

Methodologically speaking, the work follows certain key features of practice-led research, where the creative outcome constitutes the research in and of itself, rather than existing as a conduit for preexisting research conclusions. The practice-led approach prioritizes the making process, in dialogue with a theoretical framework, although this may not always be visible in the finished work. Again there are hierarchies at play here, in an epistemological sense, in how knowledge is created, viewed, accessed, and consumed. In this sense, the work takes a deliberately outward-looking approach in terms of intended readership, aiming to sit alongside works of fiction as comfortably as academic texts.

On several levels, the work inhabits gray areas and liminal spaces – between the three academic disciplines across which it is situated, between fiction and nonfiction, and between multiple social and spatial hierarchies. This liminality has come to be reflected within the work through exploring nonplaces, in an explicit sense in the nonfiction work, and implicitly in the creative work – from the limbo of the motorway service station, to the carceral dead space exploited by the prison architect and his escapee. It is also interesting to note that both "nonplace" and "nonfiction" are defined by what they are not, rather than what they are. In researching and writing this book I found that the "thing" and its Janus-like twin the "nonthing" often held an inherent friction which ultimately proved to be creatively generative.

I have tried to keep the writing centered on the concrete and rebars of the various sites I've described. I've tried to conduct interviews with silent corridors. Mumbled monologues while walking down pathways, the line painter's ruler-straight line separating me from the prisoners. I've come back on trains, furiously writing in a little notebook, which I couldn't bring into the prisons. Transcribing an inner, half-remembered harangue of silent questions and slippery answers. It might have looked like I was doing one thing in the prison but I was doing something else – patching together an erratic, fictional ethnography, with a building as the main character.

## The Parts and the Whole

This is a work in two parts. One part is a nonfiction piece called *A Circular Argument* and the other is a creative piece called *The Out*. In terms of word count, workload, reading, and research, the split has been roughly 70/30 – fiction/nonfiction. I have strived to make the sometimes perceived divide quite porous. The parts are not separate, but not entirely connected either.

Prison is arguably an in-between space/place, where waiting and being processed is a large part of the structure and daily life. In the creative part of the work, the preordained escape is made possible only by connecting strips of dead space. The nonfiction component of the work purposefully teeters on the brink of a few modes or styles of writing.

Presented sequentially like this it might seem that one part has sway over the other but the reality is that neither component was written before the other. They came into being alongside each other. A contributing factor to this was a tripartite arrangement of mentors situated in Creative Writing, Architecture, and Criminology, which for me has been very fruitful and continuously surprising.

The fictional part shouldn't have to prove itself to be clever, but nevertheless in this case it is informed by critical readings, research trips, and fieldwork, mostly through monthly visits to HMP Shotts, but also drawing from my previous experience of working as a tutor in prisons. The nonfiction shouldn't have to be entertaining or in essence have wide appeal, but I have tried to make it a clean, informed read. Hopefully I have made sure that the cross-pollination between the two parts is evident and of use, both in terms of form and in content.

## The Whole and the Parts

The work as a whole looks at prisons, and at civic spaces and to some extent the private spaces that exist within those spheres. In the creative part this is exemplified in the road network, the car, the cell. In the nonfiction part perhaps more abstractly so, in spaces and uses, focusing on the circular. Often from a higher point of view – both physically and socially, often looking at city planning and how the cell fits into the larger narrative of society. What unites the two parts of the work is the exploration of space and place, with a grounding in psychogeography and the fictional space we all inhabit. It's an investigation of the idea of

home and away, and of the transient – both in time and in space, which is a thought I came across early in the research. Dr Sarah Armstrong's ideas on the prison as a corridor, rather than a holding pen, quoted in *A Circular Argument*, struck a chord with me.

Throughout the writing of both parts I was also influenced by this quote by Jane Jacobs: "The architects, planners – and businessmen – are seized with dreams of order, and they have become fascinated with scale models and bird's-eye views. This is a vicarious way to deal with reality, and it is, unhappily, symptomatic of a design philosophy now dominant: buildings come first, for the goal is to remake the city to fit an abstract concept of what, logically, it should be" (Jacobs, 1957).

In both parts I wanted to see how the notion of "We make spaces and spaces make us" would fit in a carceral context, where someone imprisoned has very little control over how the space they are in is constructed, down to the placement of the bed, the desk lamp, and what can go on the walls. Put in contrast with the complex construction work that lies behind a prison – a highly complicated task, where safety, visibility, politics, rehabilitation, risk, classification, gender, not to mention light, electricity, water, and utilities, and a limited access to the internet, need to be considered in a way that is completely different from how a "normal" building is constructed.

Maybe I too was "seized with dreams of order." On a small scale (should main character Cecil be 5′ 9½″, or taller?) and on a large scale (Canberra, Baghdad, Brøndby Garden City, and the temporary city of Burning Man were all built to be circular – how can I decipher that?).

The prison is a complicated idea and a complicated building. For any person of any height it has to function like a whole city. Education, hygiene, health care, social interaction, and intimacy have to be catered for. When not, it may be part of the punishment, in ways that, if you live outside the walls, might seem, and often are, incredibly perplexing, slow, and often dehumanizing. The prison complex is very complex. I hope I have captured some of that friction in the following pages.

## On Writing

Practice as Research is a lovely beast to wrangle. If nothing else, this work has taught me to wear my research lightly, and at the same time to be rigorous in my imaginings. My fictional and nonfictional output have for obvious reasons bled into one another, as they should.

This relationship between fact and fiction has meant that I have had the pleasure of translating concepts and complicated ideas into character, conflict, voice, point of view, tense, and dialogue. That I have been allowed to think about narrative structures as well as real concrete structures. I've busied myself with transforming people like one of the prisoners I have talked with, and places like the circular town of Palmanova, into imagined landscapes, townscapes, weather, and into written emotions, which lie somewhere between the real, the unreal, and

the hyperreal. This porous approach has allowed me to use the structural elements of fiction to represent critical thinking, and architectural critique. To reuse bricks and marble from one kind of structure to make anew, and like all builders past and present, reimagine an edifice – in this case, a book.

I am going to miss working on this.

# Part 1
# A Circular Argument

A Circular Argument, 1–57

doi:10.1108/978-1-80071-382-620211021

**Norrköpingsanstalten – 58°35′22.7″N 16°10′14.4″E**

### *At the Gates*

The first time I walked into a prison I was a child. I was dressed in a long white sark, which touched the steps as I ascended the worn marble incline leading to the chapel. I was wearing a conical white hat, and my mother had cut out and glued three golden stars onto it, the ornaments diminishing in size the further up the hat they went. In my left hand I was holding a stick, not unlike the ones used for propping up plants too weak to stay upright themselves. A star, the same size, shape and colour as the biggest one on the cap, was pinned to the top of the stick. Swedish winters are long and dark, and to an extent so are the traditions celebrated. Usually a mix of Viking feasts and the imported ceremonies of the latecomer Christ, in this case the feast of Saint Lucia.[1,2] Outside, the flurry of snow was temporarily brightening up life, but the crystals couldn't reach inside. With a voice devoid of puberty or irony, I sang to the prisoners in the maximum security prison. Wishing them a Happy Christmas and the Season's Blessing. I doubt they had a happy time or many blessings, but I hope the diversion was welcome.

Every second Tuesday, my mother would play unihoc with a group of long-term prisoners. The rules of the game were held in much higher regard than the laws which existed outside the triple, unscalable walls. Possibly because there was no referee. These rules made sense, as they were everyone's responsibility and not handed down from any kind of authority. In this self-governed game there was not an inch of leeway. My mum was very good at this form of indoor hockey, and I think it was partly her love of team sports, and partly the political act of playing as the only woman, keeping up with people younger, angrier and fitter than her, that kept her packing her sports bag and setting out for the prison every two weeks.

Once her knees started to balloon from excess synovial fluid accumulation, she turned her love of the game into a chat over a cup of dense Nordic coffee. She became a visitor, not to a family member, but to a series of strangers, to whom she would lend her ear, dark bob and soft socialist dogma for two hours.

A couple of years later, I returned to this prison, armed with my own music, this time in the summer. We were asked to set up our equipment outside, at the centre of a gravel football pitch, in the middle of the prison exercise yard, surrounded by walls and interested/bored eyes. It turned out to be a very weird gig, and if it was weird for me, playing guitar, and able to move freely, it must have been very strange for Oskar, who was playing drums. He had two or three burly men standing right behind him, watching his every move, beat aficionados I think. As there was no back to the stage, it was a performance experimental in form if not in

[1]When Lucia refused to burn sacrifice to the emperor's image, Paschasius, Governor of Syracuse, sentenced her to be defiled in a brothel. The Christian tradition states that when the guards came to take her away, they could not move her even when they hitched her to a team of oxen. Bundles of wood were then heaped about her and set on fire, but would not burn. Finally, she met her death by the sword. (http://www.romeacrosseurope.com)

[2]Lucia's is celebrated on 13 December. On that day, a girl dresses in a white dress and a red sash, the symbol of martyrdom, and wears a crown of candles, while the boys are usually dressed as saint Stefanos.

content, our audience surrounding us. It seems the intrigue of the circular, whether for the watcher or the watched, never goes away. Maybe it has always been here?

Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832), jurist, philosopher and social reformer among other things, came up with an idea for an 'Inspection House'. A panopticon, a circular building with cells arranged around the outer wall and a central watchtower, was, he felt, the best way to solve the riddle of supervision and self-supervision. As the light came into the building from the back of the cell, inmates were never able to really see the watcher, but the central inspector remained an omnipresent and unsettling presence in every cell at any given moment, a ghostly presence of power and a constant reminder of the risks of rule-breaking.

A prison called Millbank Penitentiary, based on these all-seeing principles, employing hexagons, pentagons and a central chapel, was eventually constructed in London where the Tate Modern[3] now resides. Charles Dickens, a great observer of the time and social reformer in his own right, describes the site and the surrounding area in his novel *David Copperfield*:

> There were neither wharves nor houses on the melancholy waste of road near the great blank Prison. A sluggish ditch deposited its mud at the prison walls. Coarse grass and rank weeds straggled over all the marshy land in the vicinity. In one part, carcases of houses, inauspiciously begun and never finished, rotted away. In another, the ground was cumbered with rusty iron monsters of steam-boilers, wheels, cranks, pipes, furnaces, paddles, anchors, diving-bells, windmill-sails, and I know not what strange objects, […]. (Dickens, 2001)

The type of building Bentham helped give birth to has been built and used in many other countries too, in a few different styles and permutations, stemming from the same idea. Centralised control and self-regulation, in the fear that you might at any times be viewed by a hidden observer, seems like concept that prison architects were (are?) happy to use. The panoptic idea has germinated and spread to many parts of the world, and there are examples of buildings in Cuba, Italy, Portugal, the Netherlands, Australia, Sweden, America, South Africa and countless other places where a few people could look on, and thus dominate, many.

This kind of surveillance, the all-seeing eye enabled by bricks and mortar, is hopefully what this particular work will look at in some ways, maybe putting the spotlight on the obscured figure in the central tower for a change.

In Bentham's words, he hoped that the building would mean 'Morals reformed – health preserved – industry invigorated – instruction diffused – public burthens lightened – Economy seated, as it were, upon a rock – the Gordian knot of the Poor-Laws not cut, but untied – all by a simple idea in Architecture' (Bentham, 1791).

[3](https://www.tate.org.uk/visit/tate-britain/tate-britain-there-was-dreaded-millbank-prison)

I am sure it's not quite as straightforward as that, but this 'simple' idea in architecture has endured. It was here long before Bentham and Foucault. It will be here long after Facebook and the other digital village campfires we stare across, gazing at each other through the smoke of ones and zeros are all but memories.

Around 1791, architect Willey Reveley received £10 for helping Bentham with sketches of a Panopticon prison. Seen from above, the T-shaped cells of Reveley's blueprint for a panoptical prison all face inwards. In the middle of the circle is an eye. All-seeing perhaps, but surely even the eye of the state must sometimes blink? Framing this eye is a triangle, and on its sides the words, Mercy, Justice, VIGILANCE (artist's capitalisation). Reveley also wanted to straighten the Thames but parliament rejected all four of his proposals. Like the Thames scheme and the Panopticon prison, his designs for a public bath complex at Bath and an infirmary at Canterbury were never completed. This is who we base a lot of our 'design ideas' on.[4]


Minkowski space.[5]

[4](http://transcribe-bentham.ucl.ac.uk/td/JB/118/174/001)

[5]Minkowski, Hermann, from address *Space and Time*, delivered at the 80th Assembly of German Natural Scientists and Physicians (21 September 1908).

**HMP Low Moss – 55°55′24.4″N 4°11′48.0″W**

### *Just Do(n't Do) It*

Coming to prison for the first time as an adult was different. This time I was in HMP Low Moss.[6] Not only was I in a foreign country, where my presence was preceded by all kinds of checks that bore little meaning to me, but the language, culture, subcultures, class system, implications and undercurrents were in some part known, in some part unknown and in some part ignored. I came straight from a stag do where I had spent two nights sleeping, almost spooning another man, in a cold kata tent. I was hungover, but not in a Bukowski way, or glamorously like Marlon Brando. I was just tired, and dirty, and I had definitely had enough of spending time with men, talking about manly things in manly ways.

I had injured a ligament at the stag do and couldn't properly bend my knee. I stank of Tiger Balm and had nervously put my stash of ibuprofen in a glove box before entering the prison car park. This was not a soldier's injury, nor was I a hero fresh off the football pitch. I was just unable to walk properly or sit down. I felt physically inferior because I knew I couldn't even run if I had to. I felt like the prison was a place where people sized you up, both in terms of actual shoulder measurements and your position on the imaginary X–Y axes of first impressions, faster than anywhere else, where a visitor would quickly be placed on a grid ranging from friend to foe via a complicated set of values. I came away not liking the place. I came away having asked the manager of the education unit if there were any jobs going. In the car, I retrieved the hidden blister pack and the personal freedom, that is silence and space.

Within the confines of the prison walls and the system, the posturing, gesturing and stylised behaviour is off the scale. As a foreigner, as a free man, as white/average height/build/looks, etc., I am happy to sidestep that. And biology has helped me in that sense. The body I inhabit raises no questions really, and in prison, I have always made an effort to keep it so, which includes choice of clothes and trainers – especially trainers, which is the only part of my attire that I have ever had a comment on (Asics Sonoma 3, if you were wondering).

This complicated sense of fashion and pride, class and money, displayed on your feet, is complex and multifaceted, and largely beyond my grasp, despite being above-average interested in trainers. This particular aspect of prison life is also illuminated in David Barton, Mary Hamilton and Roz Ivanic's *Situated Literacies*:

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[6]'Low Moss opened in March 2012. This prison's design capacity is 784 and it manages male offenders on remand, short term offenders (serving less than 4 years), long term offenders (serving 4 years or more), life sentence offenders and extended sentence offenders (Order of Life Long Restriction) primarily from the North Strathclyde Community Justice Authority area. The facilities include a link centre where offenders are able to deal with matters relating to employment, housing, social work, through care addiction services, etc. as well as facilities to help offenders address their re-offending and support them to re-integrate back into the community on their release'. (http://www.sps.gov.uk/Corporate/Prisons/LowMoss/HMP-Low-Moss.aspx)

> At the time of the incident, credibility in the outside world was no longer to be achieved wearing Adidas trainers. This change of cultural marker explained why my informant was so adamant that his Prison shoes be customised to Nikes in order to bring him into the borderland Discourse of his community as a street-wise non-Prisonised individual. (Wilson, 2000)

And here 'informant' means 'person who takes part in a study', rather than 'snitch/grass/insider'. This illuminates another complicated detail of doing research in prisons. Worth noting too that in the example above, the shoes were neither Adidas nor Nikes to begin with. They were regulation plimsolls with tape, or marker pen applied, to make them look like 'outside' trainers. This is not unlike the myriad ways to 'corrupt' the correct use of a school tie, one of the few ways to rebel when uniformed, while under the wings of primary and secondary education.

I can see how this being in the world, and being not in this world, trying to fit in and follow trends, but being denied the apparent free will of the marketplace, easily breaks or makes men and women inside. Especially if the environment tells you that your gender role and position on the sliding scale of hierarchies is tied to what you wear, when in prison uniform there are not many ways to display oneself, barring tattoos and shoes and body size.

*

The next time I set foot in the same prison I was an employee of Motherwell College and contracted by the Scottish Prison Service to deliver classes adhering to the Curriculum for Excellence. During my day of preparatory training, I was told not to trust anyone, not to take anything from, or give anything to, anyone. I was told not to give anything away about myself either. 'If you live in a house, tell them you live in a flat. If you drive, tell them you catch the bus. If you live in Glasgow, tell them you live in Edinburgh, in town, just somewhere in town, don't go into specifics'. This advice, bordering on a set of rules, was quite difficult to take in when the rest of my life has very little risk in it. If this wasn't weird enough, after a quick lunch in the staff canteen, amongst wide men in uniform, we were taught how to fight our way out of a room. With karate chops and loud screams. I was paired up with a weedy film director called Henry, and we were given a full protective Judo kit to awkwardly step into. For about an hour, we semi-politely pretended that the other person was trying to keep us in the room, to be used as a hostage. With splayed fingers, like the instructor told us to use, as part of the Spontaneous Protection Enabling Accelerated Response (SPEAR) technique,[7] we spent the afternoon grunting, both equally convinced that this would be the very last approach we would take if things turned sour in the classroom.

[7]The SPEAR system (originally an acronym for Spontaneous Protection Enabling Accelerated Response) is a close quarter protection system which uses a person's reflex action in threatening situations as a basis for defence. Developed by Tony Blauer.