



Banging them out: An affective politics of prison sound

Stefano Bloch^{*}, Enrique Alan Olivares-Pelayo

School of Geography, Development, and Environment, University of Arizona, United States

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we offer the examples of “banging out” and “quieting the run” to the prison and carceral geographies literature, highlighting the place-making capacities and material effect of sound within state-sanctioned and austere spaces of captivity. We argue that it is sound, as just one component of the affective atmosphere of prison, that allows prisoners to exert agentic control and traverse spatial and social distance through coordinated sonic attacks and forced silence orchestrated from the bottom up.

1. Introduction

1.1. Banging out Barry

The steel doors to our run opened with the dull thrum of their motorized controls, closing with a clang as they locked into position. Two CO's (correctional officers) entered, the jangle of keys and the chirping of their radios revealing their position. The sounds of a prisoner could be heard: a muted shuffle of flip flops on concrete, the rubbing of pant legs against one another as he walked. I pressed my face against the tiny apertures that perforated the solid steel door of my cell,¹ peering out onto the only section of the run that I could see.² The two COs came into view, along with a chubby, inoffensive looking Wood³ who moved with his eyes downcast. My neighbor to the left, Chris, who held the keys to the run for the Chicanos,⁴ extended a greeting.

“Sup, Wood. What’s good?” Chris asked.

The new prisoner shuffled past without responding. When he passed my cell, I greeted him as well.

“Alright now,” I offered, along with a head nod. The prisoner walked past me without looking my way.

“Damn Chris, did we just get shined off?”

In a muted tone, Chris spoke so that only I would hear him, cell to cell.

“I’ve been hearing the homies communicate about someone all morning. I think this could be him.”

Chris was referring to the coded messages that had been exchanged at full volume since 10:00am. As soon as the self-imposed quiet time ended, homies had jumped on the cluster,⁵ yelling themselves hoarse passing along coded cyphers encrypted in Nahuatl, the language of the Aztecs. The numbers meant something to people like Chris. He had the ability to decipher it with the codes that he kept in his cell. For people like me it was just part of the ambient racket of SMUI⁶ — ancient Mesoamerican numerals blending with the sounds of men taking a shit or doing burpees.

Above us on the second floor of the run, a cell door opened and the new prisoner was deposited. We could hear the officers removing handcuffs through the trapdoor in the new man’s cell. As soon as the main door to the run closed behind the COs, Chris jumped up, yelling.

“Excuse me on the run,” Chris said, “Hey! New guy! What’s up man?”

I sat on my toilet, situated near my door so that I could listen to every part of the interaction. Chris hailing the new arrival had me tense. The silence from the new man was a worrisome sign, a lack of decorum that

^{*} Corresponding author.

E-mail address: blochs@arizona.edu (S. Bloch).

¹ This vignette is pulled from autoethnographic data gathered while imprisoned in a maximum security unit.

² A “run” is part of a prison housing unit that refers to a row of cells on a particular cell block, or the upper and lower sections of a SHU.

³ “Wood,” short for “Peckerwood,” is a term used by and to describe White prisoners.

⁴ A prisoner who “holds the keys to the run” enforces the reglas, or rules, and calls the shots for a particular STG.

⁵ The “cluster” refers to a collection of adjoining runs, comprised of individual cells.

⁶ SMU stands for Special Management Unit, also known as “solitary confinement,” with the II indicating the level of security.

might signify that this new prisoner was a problem of some kind

"You aren't going to talk to me?" Chris asked. "Alright...thank you on the run."

Chris relinquished his control over the noises. Toilets resumed flushing and voices raised back up to a hubbub of conversation. Upstairs I could hear two of my friends cracking jokes about the new guy's silence. Within a few minutes, Chris was back on the run.

"Excuse me on the run," Chris began at normal speaking volume, followed by an even louder "Excuse me on the cluster! Hey Omé!"

He said the second phrase in a rehearsed voice, pitched at maximum volume, but with a cadence that accounted for the reverberations as it bounced across the entire cluster and into another run. By using the Nahuatl word for "two," Chris was hailing the head of the second run on the cluster, who was also the head of the whole cluster for the Chicanos.⁷

From a distance, we could make out a slightly muffled "Excuse me on the cluster!" "What's up?!" Omé asked.

The next half hour passed in a coded exchange between Chris and Omé, the Nahuatl numbers echoing throughout the cluster as people kept the noise to an absolute minimum. When it was over, both Chris and Omé formally thanked the Cluster, then their respective runs, and got off the line. Then Chris got back on his own run to address the Wood.

"Hey man, I want to ask you one more time to please have a conversation with me. We need to talk."

This time, a new voice responded. I jumped up from off my rack where I had been laying down so that I could more closely listen to the conversation.

"Yo. What's up?"

"Ok, so you can talk!" Chris said. "What's your name bro?"

"I'm Barry."

"Alright Barry, I'm Chris. Check it out, you can't stay here."

"But I just got here," Barry responded.

"I know, Barry, but the fact is that this run isn't for you. I need you to roll up out of here. Are you willing to do that?"

"Why do I have to leave? What did I do to you?"

"You know the answer to that question. Now I'd like the answer to my question. Will you tell the cops that you need to leave this run the next time they come in?"

"I need to sleep. I haven't had a good night's sleep in a week."

"Going to sleep on this run is not a good idea, Barry. Let the cops know that you can't stay here. Thank you on the run."

And with that, Chris reigned his voice back inside his cell. On the tier above me, Wolfie, a Chicano youngster with a wicked sense of humor, started loudly claiming he could smell feces emanating from Barry's cell.

The next time the cops came in, we all hushed as we tried to overhear Barry requesting a cell change. Requesting that the cops move you to another run was effectively requesting Protective Custody, a fate analogous to social and sometimes even literal death for a prisoner in the General Population. The cops passed through without Barry stopping them. When they left, Chris got back on the cluster. More coded messages were exchanged, and then Chris hailed us again on the run.

"Alright homies, seems like Barry wants things done the hard way. Hey! Barry, check this out you fucking piece of shit. You're fucking not welcome here! You need to get the fuck out of here?! You hearing me you fucking punk? Get the fuck out of here!"

Chris's invectives shattered the sonic truce that mitigated relationships in maximum security. The language that he was using violated

every taboo. It was more than an insult. It was a war cry.

People who had until this moment been silent throughout the morning erupted into bloodcurdling screams, yelling at Barry to kill himself, calling him disgusting names, and loudly banging on the doors of their cells.

"Alright, Raza,⁸ Woods, lets figure this out. We're going on shifts. Four hours on, until this fucking child molesting piece of shit gets the fuck off our run. Kiki, Wolfie, you're up. Twister, Nico, you're on at 8 pm. I'll take midnight with Tiger, and then Gopher and Cholo take 4am. Then it cycles back."

Chris had included two Woods — Gopher and Tiger — because as the head of the Raza on a run with no White shotcaller,⁹ Chris had some authority over them as well, if not absolute command.

"Alright, pop the fuck off!"

I hurried up and threw a padlock inside of a tube sock and started beating it against the stainless steel of my commode.

2. Listening to prisoners

In the environment of the prison, the senses become amplified in their import and impact. Sound resonates further, having an outsized material effect on the composition of the carceral lived experience. It propagates through the medium of air as a longitudinal wave, displacing oxygen molecules as it moves toward an intended target, manifesting in the brain as an electrical signal prompted by the vibration of an eardrum, wielded as a weapon within the confines of maximum security prison. For prisoners, particularly at the highest levels of security and for those who assert themselves sonically, sound becomes the primary means by which they regulate their environment, express agentic control, and enact violence through a coordinated acoustic assault known as "banging out."

Bars of soap, padlocks purchased from the commissary, and other solid objects and personal effects are dropped into tube socks to prepare for a choreographed, deafening racket directed at a prisoner who cannot be accessed, but who can be attacked all the same. An entire run of prisoners locked in their respective cells will coordinate the first wave of the onslaught, laying on their back, kicking their door with hard-soled boots, smashing improvised cudgels onto their stainless steel latrine, pummeling the frame of their iron bunk; shouting themselves hoarse through the percussive atmosphere with verbal abuse and slurs that capitalize on the gratuitous use of emasculating words that remain otherwise taboo within prison society: "bitch," "punk," "snitch."

This first round of sound will last for as long as stamina permits, up to four hours of full-volume invective. The rest of the day will be divided into shifts and assigned to pairs of prisoners who take part in the assault. When a shift begins, it is a prisoner's turn to ratchet up the volume and violent language aimed at the unwanted neighbor, ensuring that there can be no respite during their allotted time. This cacophonous campaign will continue for days on end if needed, until the undesirable prisoner is finally moved by prison staff to another tier where he may or may not face the same fate of being "banged out."

Not everyone who has been to prison has banged or been banged out. But anyone who has been to prison or jail will comment on the distinct sound of a cell block. Similar to the hum of a school cafeteria at lunch, the prison din of constant communication, laughter, singing, guffaws,

⁸ "Raza," literally "race," is used to identify people with a shared identity and is used as a synonym for "Chicano." It includes the grouping of prisoners with a "sureño," or south side, "gang" identity, including those who "run" with the Mexican Mafia ("La Eme") in the US prison system.

⁹ A "Shotcaller" is the head decision maker and rule enforcer in a particular car, on a run, or for an entire prison gang depending on the socio-spatial context.

⁷ The use of Chicanos here refers to the racialized group of prisoners who "run" together.

and whoops becomes seared into the brain for anyone who has been forced to live in such an environment. Unlike a school cafeteria, many of the voices are deeper and more resonate, the laughter both joyous and sinister, the yelps often followed by shouts and screams that are expressive and sometimes involuntary. Coupled with the constant presence of security and surveillance infrastructure that sonically manifests in an array of chirps, buzzes, clicks, clatter, and bangs, prisons produce a singular sonic sphere.

Such sonic spheres are “atmospheric,” to use Anderson’s (2009) formulation and Turner et al.’s (2022) application, in that they envelope without conscious consideration, like the force of gravity. The almost constant cacophony of prison sound produces an atmosphere that no less contributes to sensory stressors and post-traumatic stresses not easily unheard from within the soma even after release (Bloch and Olivares-Pelayo, 2024a). The presence of sound becomes most apparent through its absence, when it is forced to stop by a shotcaller who abruptly quiets the run, or the self-imposed quietude of “10 to 10”¹⁰. For Anderson (2009, 78), “atmosphere” in this sense, and notwithstanding a deliberate banging:

seems to express something vague. Something, an ill-defined indefinite something, that exceeds rational explanation and clear figuration. Something that hesitates at the edge of the unsayable. Yet, at one and the same time, the affective qualities that are given to this something by those who feel it are remarkable for their singularity.

In a prison context, atmospheric affects and effects of sound are sometimes barely acknowledged, at other times they are remarkable as organizing features, providing sensorial cues for appropriate social behavior (Herrity, 2021, 3). As Herrity (ibid.) puts it in her exploration of the sensorial, “the management of social life within these spaces [including prisons] has utility for understanding order and its maintenance as well as social experience more broadly within places of punishment and social control.” For those who have written full monographs about their experience as prisoners, sound, like other senses that are part and parcel of the rhythms of daily life, is as unremarkable as the air they breathed and sometimes as noteworthy as a sonic boom (see for example Abbott, 1991; Berkman, 2016; Bunker, 2000; Earley, 2011; Hassine, 1996; Pendergrass and Hoke, 2018; Santos, 2007; Vick and McRay, 2018).

In this paper we engage with the literature on prison soundscapes that emphasize how sound produces an affective space of communication within a hardscape that does not move and is not easily altered, or for that matter entered or exited. As the prison sound literature shows, sound becomes one of the most effective mechanisms for world building when bodies are physically separated by concrete, metal, and glass, thereby necessitating a reliance on sound as a transactional means of cooperation, competition, and control.

3. Listening to the prison literature

Banging someone out, like “quieting the run” which we describe below, is one of many ways prisoners exert some semblance of control over the institutional din and dull hum of a typical maximum-security penitentiary. Despite attempts at totalizing the carceral environment, prisoners are at constant pains to shape, manipulate, contest, curate, and personalize prison spaces to fit their needs, wants, and desires. It is in the socio-spatial-temporal-emotional context of prison “politics” that sound, like other modalities of manipulation, is used as an instrument of coordinated control and material violence. Such prison politics refers to the bottom-up, self-imposed rules or “reglas” that govern the norms, mores, and more mundane aspects of prison existence; everything from gang-enforced codes of personal conduct (Bloch and Olivares-Pelayo, 2021; Infante et al., 2023), to the racial cordoning of space and

proscribed interactions between prisoners across a given facility. Coordinated sonic attacks are as much part of these politics and enforced regals as the more tactile and corporeal forms of “banging” that include beatings and stabbings when in close contact.

We situate this work in a US prison setting in which prison politics are rife, while simultaneously seeking to contribute to the broader literature on prison sound and carceral geography. We stop short of advancing the equally important rehabilitative, abolitionist, and reformist approaches to prison conditions (e.g. Crewe et al., 2014; Gilmore, 2022; Scott et al., 2023; Howes and Walfish, 2023), choosing instead to provide examples of authentic and agentic capabilities of prisoners subjected to the highest-level of state cordoning, coercion, and control. Having personally resided in these spaces of imprisonment in some capacity, and as the introductory vignette illustrates, having contributed firsthand to banging someone out and quieting a run, we are able to pull from autoethnographic data to reflect on and inform our understanding of the productive politics of prison sound. We speak to the materiality of sound and the role sonic fluidity plays in producing prison space, enacting prison politics, and affectively altering prison soundscapes.

We see sound as part of an alternative ontological reality vis-à-vis noise as well as its counterpart of forced, coordinated silence. It is physical cordoning that defines the spatiality of maximum security imprisonment, which necessitates reliance on sound as a mobile, intrusive force that manifests as a material act and the purveyor of political agency for those who choose or are able to bang. For prisoners, sound remains as a medium of social connectivity when they are otherwise corporally restricted from movement through open space. And yet, even when forbidden from making physical contact, they retain the ability to compress spatial distance as demonstrated most plainly when they incite an auditory attack.

The example of “banging out” illustrates just one of many material effects of sound experienced within a prison ecosystem, while simultaneously recentering the prison as the *sine qua non* of carceral geographies and the carceral geographies literature. We position prison as a sanctioned space of proximate captivity in which sound, like sight and smell, comprises a contained and concentrated “atmospheric affect,” remaining attuned to what Turner et al. (2022, 5) identify as the “sensory and embodied experiences of prison space and the affective bodily responses they elicit.” Further, following Herrity’s (2024, 7) advocacy for “methodical listening” and the use of the Lefebvrian concept of “polyrhythmia” as a lens through which to understand prison rhythms and routines that signify “what a good day sounds and feels like, and what this tells us about how power imposes a particular sense of time and space in prison” (2024, 8), we are attuned to environmental factors that lend “additional nuance and dimension to temporal and spatial dimensions of prison experience.” Such an invocation of what Herrity (ibid., 8) identifies as an “aural experience” can help scholars “develop different orientations to relationships between people and place,” particularly when engaged in site ontologies of prison experience.

Herrity’s (2024) work on prison sound has been the most prominent in terms of specifically evoking “banging” as the predominant form of agentic noise making. Based on observations in a British facility, Herrity (2024, 115–117) breaks banging down to four distinct types of communication:

- “*Rapid, rhythmic: Bangbangbang*”: Denoting a prisoner’s frustration.
- “*Slow, rhythmic: Bang. Bang. Bang*”: Expression of a more intense displeasure.
- “*Arrhythmic: Bangbang ... bang. Bang ... bang*”: Indicating distress or despair.
- “*Rapid: moving location around the wing*”: Always celebratory.

In both Herrity’s and our present example, concerted and coordinated banging acts as a form of communication as well as a source of what Sibley and Van Hoven (2009) refer to as a “contamination” in how it permeates prison space. Contamination, including the wielding of

¹⁰ Prisoners enforce a 10am to 10pm quiet time known as “10 to 10.”

feces and urine (O'Mara, 2024), evokes the presence of and reliance on foreign, unwanted, and abject smells, sounds and substances that act as weapons of resistance for the those who are restrained. Sound, however, travels further, is more resonant, and far harder to contain. It moves across and makes space, contributing to what Simandan (2016, 250) refers to as the "intertwined dimensions of distance" or what we understand as the sonic shrinking of distance between bodies and cells through banging. Put simply, it is sound that allows prisoners, as relational place-makers, to interact with and traverse spatial and social distance through an assemblage of sensations, intensities, and curated conditions. Just as time and space, or "timespace," is socially constructed and co-constitutive of distance (Simandan, *ibid.*, 251), so too is sound "imbricated with social life." In advancing this approach through the following section, we implicitly evoke the work of Revill (2016, 240–241), conducted outside a prison setting, by providing an example of the "processes and practices by which sound actually makes space, shaping and transforming experiences of spatiality and providing the resources and affordances for diverse political practice and action in the process."

4. Affective carceral geographies

Within the geographical literature on prisons and carcerality there exists a focus on the less immediately tangible aspects of imprisonment (Bloch and Olivares-Pelayo, 2024a, 2024b; Gill et al., 2018; Martin and Mitchelson, 2009; Moran et al. 2018). These less tangible components constitute an assemblage of emotional, sensorial, somatic, and atmospheric environments that comprise prison life (Philo, 2001). In advancing this focus, geographers and other social scientists have both implicitly and explicitly provided an assemblage-based modality through which scholars contextualize and conceptualize carceral space in increasingly nuanced ways. We emphasize one of these easily overlooked yet consequential aspects of prison life by focusing on prison sound as per our personal experience of being subjected to the sight, smell, taste, touch, and emotion of incarceration. Relying on that autoethnographic data as a frame for this article, we review the literature on prison worlds that explicate affective atmospheres within carceral environments.

It is in the work of Hemsworth (2016, 90) that we clearly see a recognition of how the "(in)tangible properties of sound shape emotional and embodied experiences of incarceration." Though based on data derived primarily from the perspective of prison staff and others who Hemsworth (*ibid.*, 90–91) identifies as "gatekeepers," the work no less advances our understanding of how the "material properties of sound, including resonance, vibration, and fluidity, inspire auditory epistemologies." Hemsworth's (*ibid.*, 92) evocation of "feeling the range" speaks to a focus on the subtle changes to sonic environments in which, for example, "a person in a cell might listen carefully to pinpoint the location of guards, using carefully honed skills in echo-location, while many guards pay close attention to feel the range and so take necessary precautions if the sonic atmosphere or pulse warns of danger." Hemsworth's is an affective prison landscape of careful listening and feeling, and one that pulls from the literature on affect that has pervaded the discipline for decades (Thrift, 2004). Specifically, it is the concept of "affective atmospheres" that has advanced scholarly understanding of the intangibles of attachment and place-making "rooted in intimate familiarity and daily life experiences" (Luo et al., 2024) through a heightened "sonic sensibility" (Gallagher, 2016; Gallagher and Prior, 2014). Our examples of "banging out" and "quieting the run" provide examples of affective atmospheric conditions that are rarely if ever experienced by outsiders.

Given that lack of exposure to prison's affective atmospheres, we further agree with Hemsworth (2016, 90) that "the notion of 'the everyday' in prisons, and the complex role of sound in the emotional and embodied experiences of incarceration, remain under-recognized." We do, though, find that what literature does exist on prison sound and other affective environments to be formative for our own framing

otherwise derived from firsthand experience. This includes work by Moran (2013, 174) for whom spatial analysis of prison provides a "productive and useful 'grounding' of contemporary geographies of emotion and affect." In fact, it is in the larger body of work by Moran and her collaborators (2016, 2020, 2024) that we see a consistent consideration of the sensorial realities of prison spaces and experiences; much of which is discussed in terms of prisoner, visitor, and staff responses to the amorphous and "pervasive atmospheres" of architectural and landscape design (Turner et al., 2022).

Relatedly, Rice (2016) develops a consideration of sound within such atmospheres and affective prison landscapes derived from data from published prisoners' diaries. Based on those first-person accounts, he sees the making of sound as an expression of "acoustical agency." In an seeming contradiction, Rice (*ibid.*, 8) both conceptualizes the complex ecology of carceral sound as the medium through which prisoners exercise control over their environment, while simultaneously pointing to

"an unpleasant soundscape [which] might be understood as a kind of sonic punishment, an aspect of the wider punishing function of prisons. Prisoners must endure the sonic environment in which they find themselves. They cannot avoid it (completely at least) and so have little acoustical agency in this regard."

Both, however, are true.

Prisoners in general population are subjected to the din of prison life over which they have little ability to shape their soundscape, replete with clamorous conversations, sporadic yelling, the clanging of doors, intermittent buzzing, and directives boisterously issued by prison staff. But in our example of "banging out" and "quieting the run," "shotcallers" on higher security yards and runs are able to cut through both the noise and the silence on demand, and for specific purposes at their own discretion.

Whereas prisons are notoriously noisy places, inside and out (Hemsworth, 2015), forced silence can be deafening in terms of how it takes hold of a unit, manifesting invisible sources of power and respect. Outside the "10 to 10," and regardless of institutional protocol, "quieting the run" can occur at any time. In quieting the run, a prisoner who wants to "leave" their cell to communicate with an interlocutor in another cell on the same run requests that the sonic space outside the cell be cordoned off from intrusion by extraneous noises. By pronouncing "excuse me on the run," a prisoner temporarily claims that space as his own. Once the business at hand is concluded, the prisoner will signal that they are relinquishing their claim on the aural environment by expressing their gratitude, summarized by a simple "thank you on the run," at which point the level of sound returns to normal.

For conversations that must take place between prisoners housed on different runs within the same housing unit, there is the possibility to quiet the whole cluster. If a respected prisoner proclaims "excuse me on the run," that request will be echoed by subsequent prisoners passing the request to "excuse me on the cluster" on down the line of cells and into neighboring runs. A shouted request for dialogue can also be made at maximum volume to the recipient of the "call." Since the entire cluster is now privy to "ear witness" the dialogue, there can be no expectation of privacy. These intra-run and inter-cluster communiques will consequently always be in code, decipherable by those who hold the cipher. Shotcallers disseminate their respective cipher to trusted prisoners who have the role of "heading" the run for their respective "race."

While quieting the run can be requested for a variety of reasons, it is how an order to expel someone is made, thereby allowing for the directive to bang someone out to be transmitted. In addition to being an effect of sound that is too loud, or too unpleasant, displacement in a prison setting likewise results from what being banged out signifies about the targeted prisoner. Being banged out is a disciplinary and displacing force that results from the meaning sound is imbued with in a particular socio-spatial context, resulting in a social death even after the banging stops.

Likewise, being subjected to the "silent treatment," or to be put "on

shine,” signifies its own sonically conceived social death. Getting put on shine could be used to cut off a gambler or a drug user until they could pay off their debt, or in extreme cases it produces an enduring nonentity. An individual on shine was made mute by shotcaller mandate, and no one would risk their own ostracism for the sake of communicating with the person on shine, as the consequence for talking to someone on shine was getting shined. In a high security environment where social interactions and interlocution have outsized benefits and consequences, sound is imbued with great value.¹¹

5. Expanding the sonic sphere

Informed by Revill's (2016, 253) exploration of “sonic political agency” and Kanngieser's (2012) affective politics of speaking and listening, we have turned to affective atmospheres constituted by sound more than by direct corporeal contact or other methods by which meaning and emotion is transmitted. Sound, heard in this way, produces prison atmospheres of displacement as well as control. To quote Gallagher (2016, 43), this involves understanding of how “affect involves any kind of body impinging on another body in some way that augments or diminishes the affected body's capacities to act,” which may rely on questions of method (MacFarlane, 2020), site (Kou et al, 2021), and even epistemological “deafness” (Paiva, 2018), all of which remain ripe for geographical exploration.

To be sure, the use of sound for (re)distributing power does not begin or end with prisoners sequestered behind prison gates. Not only have scholars written about the state-sanctioned weaponization of sound in extra-legal settings (Cusick, 2008; Elmer and Neville, 2021; Goodman, 2012; Parker, 2019), but so too have carceral geographers addressed the long reach of carcerality across and into the myriad spaces that constitute Foucault's (1995) “carceral archipelago.” There is therefore wide-ranging work to be done on affect and the effects of sound as experienced all along what Gill et al. (2018) identify as the “carceral circuit.” Such work has and can continue to take into consideration how “affect has been used as a conceptual filter to understand sound as a force that physically moves bodies” all along this continuum of carcerality (see Gallagher et al., 2017).

Further bringing carceral logics to our understanding of over-policed places withing “free society,” Lally (2023) has applied Woodward's (2014) concept of repressive “state affects” to his discussion of contemporary legal tactics and technologies employed by police, thereby implicitly answering calls in the discipline to explore the affective landscape of carcerality beyond prison walls (see also Loyd et al., 2012). As Lally (2023, 576) puts it, sound is “always present in exercises of state power,” or what Correia and Wall (2021) identify as “vibrations of order.” In this present paper, we are interested in scholarship looking at what Lally (ibid.) identifies as the “routinized interventions into social life” effected by the policing of sounds and other legally codified “nuisances” (Bloch, 2024).

Like Lally, Shabazz (2015, 2) implicates architectures, infrastructures, techniques, mechanisms, mores, and normative moral codes for their ability to “prizonize” space via the mundane and mutable deployment of carcerality across the everyday “sonic order of urban space” (Atkinson, 2007). As Shabazz shows, this deployment is done first and foremost by police acting as the most intrusive agents of the state in the lives of those residing in spaces of de facto captivity (see also Gilmore, 2007; Hawthorne, 2019; Jefferson, 2015). Such policing and place-making is far from silent, even when it demands some semblance of silence. The policing of sound and silence, so to speak, calls into

question what LaBelle (2018) identifies as “sonic agency.”

Back on the prison run, as carceral sound scholars have discussed, attuned listening to the vibrations and subtle issuance of verbal warnings and codified whistles used to indicate an approaching threat within a contained aural ecology likewise comprises the sonic order of control and contestation. With a hushed “trucha”¹² or almost instinctual “one-time”¹³ belted out for everyone on the tier to hear, it is not just the articulated verbal warnings that catch others' awareness, but the tone and immediacy that is able to cut through the air and demand serious attention from other prisoners. In fact, sometimes banging someone out begins with a whispered question or suggestion.

6. Conclusion

For me (Bloch), as a kid, it was the deafening sound of the electromagnetic door locks and buzzers, as well as the always-crying babies in the waiting rooms where I spent so many hours of my youth. Those same rooms held the hushed conversations about contraband, whispered with a sinister resonance. When it was a no-contact visit, it was the canned sound of the voice on the other end of the phone we used to communicate through thick glass, and the amplification of the metal cord that crackled and whined with every movement. As an adult it was the relatively quiet nights despite the relentless buzz from the caged fluorescent bulb above my bunk. The sound drowned out by loud laughter from the cops and guards who worked the graveyard shift, as well as the sporadic scream of a prisoner in some kind of pain (Bloch, 2019).

For me (Olivares-Pelayo), it is the toilets. The propulsive explosion of water forced down the stainless steel bowl used to cover the smell as well as the sound of a bowel movement. A noise that was so disruptive it necessitated yelling out “water!” before each flush. It is also the jangling keys, slamming doors, and the click, click, click of handcuffs that were constant reminders that I was locked up in an environment of hard metal. But it is also the laughter. The sound of men laughing was a reprieve from the mechanical sounds that comprise much of prison life. And of course it is the moments of forced, tense silence when quieting a run provided contrast to the riotous sound of banging someone out.

Sound is one of the most effective mechanism for worldbuilding inside lockdown where free movement, material comforts, and social mobilization are otherwise stripped as a form of punishing dehumanization. Prisoners' physical space is circumscribed by the state, but their sonic and sensorial space is open to infinite interpretive iterations. Sound becomes the primary medium through which a semblance of agency is exerted for some, even in the most austere conditions. By providing the autoethnographic example of banging and silencing, we hope to contribute to what Herrity et al. (2022) identify as the ways “researchers are attuning themselves to the sensorial features of detention, deprivation, control, and power, by incorporating new (or refined) methodological and theoretical approaches.”

For some scholars of carcerality, such deprived, controlled, and contested spaces are those in which creativity flourishes and identity is uniquely constituted. This is the case for Shabazz (2021) who recognizes the enduring “relationship between creativity and containment” in carceral environments. Similarly, scholars have shown prison to be a place where music as a form of creative sound making can be used as a therapeutic device (Hjørnevik and Waage, 2019; Lee, 2023), and, like writing and other modes of agentic expression, provide prisoners in both men's and women's facilities (Moran et al., 2013) with the opportunity to “carve out a place of humanity in a world not fit for humans; a place of

¹¹ Given their institutional power and related ability to simply move away from a shine or an attempted banging out, COs are not subject to direct, personal sonic attacks outside of the rare epithet cast in their direction or otherwise having to endure the usual atmospheric soundscape during work hours (Turner et al., 2023).

¹² “Trucha” is a Spanish slang, meaning “take caution” or “watch out.”

¹³ “One-time” is slang for the police, or more specifically, a passing police car or prison guard.

freedom in an un-free world; an assertion of the right of the captive to be creative and expressive” (Shabazz, 2014, 592).

By focusing on the sonic sphere of the prison as we do in this paper, we are in effect recentring state-sanctioned detention as the most hardened and tangible of all forms of captivity. And it is not just sound that tells the story of life on the inside. So much work remains to be done in terms of conceptualizing the affective landscape and assemblages that constitute this enduring institution. We offer that those who have experienced imprisonment first hand are the ones whose contributions to the carceral geographies literature remains wanting, notwithstanding the autoethnographic work that has emerged from within the social sciences more broadly (Bloch, 2025; Bolden, 2020; Walker, 2022; see also Turner and Knight, 2020).

As Hemsworth (2016, 96) reminds us in her focus on the sonic component of prisonization, “what sound tells us about the material and political constitution of prisons is one step towards challenging unsustainable practices of incarceration.” By extension, and as part of prison abolitionist and reformist approaches alike, we must begin by being attuned, as scholars like Herrity (2024) show us, to the atmospheric, emotional, creative, as well as contestative realities experienced and advanced by incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people. The prison, we assert, continues to offer geographers a rich soundscape worth listening to.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Stefano Bloch: Writing – original draft. **Enrique Alan Olivares-Pelayo:** Writing – original draft.

Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

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