

## Narratives of translators

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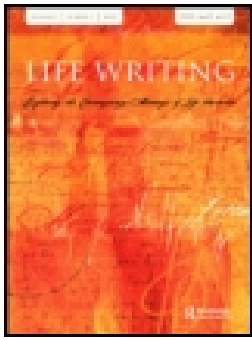
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# Narratives of Translators: The Translational Function of Prisoner Writing

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## ABSTRACT



Prison is a marginal space that is hidden from society, and life writing by prisoners thus offers valuable insights into prison life. This paper examines prisoner writing, as a genre neglected by academia, focusing on how the prisoner-writer describes imprisonment to the non-prisoner reader. My analysis explores Davies's (1990. *Writers in Prison*. Oxford: Blackwell) assertion that prisoner writing represents an act of translation. Drawing on Doloughan's (2016. *English as a Literature in Translation*. London: Bloomsbury) description of 'narratives of translation' that stem from multilingual and multicultural life experiences, I theorise that the prisoner-writer can be likened to a translator. In exploring this assertion, I employ archival research to compile a corpus of short stories about prison, written by UK prisoners, and published via periodicals and competitions. My reading of these texts centres on the presence of diegetic translators who fulfil a translational role, describing prison life to other characters and to the non-prisoner reader. I produce a typology of these translators, and examine how they establish their authority and credibility to translate prison life, to understand how prisoner-writers conceive of the carceral authorial process. My analysis offers further evidence of the translational function of prisoner writing, and demonstrates the value of reading life writing through the lens of translation.

## KEYWORDS

Prison writing; translation; contemporary literature; British literature; short story

## Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has demonstrated the disparity between public perceptions of prison conditions, and the lived experience of incarceration. With significant swathes of the global population confined to their homes under Covid-19 lockdown measures, comparisons with penal imprisonment were perhaps inevitable. However, in the face of such analogies, people with lived experience of prison have sought to correct public perceptions of the carceral, countering that prison's physical confinement, material deprivations and psychological distress bear little resemblance to lockdown in one's own home. These differing perceptions of the carceral qualities of the pandemic suggest that the majority of people outside prison have little understanding of prison

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life. Given public ignorance of carceral conditions, this article considers how life writing by prisoners can bridge the gap between the prison and non-prison worlds, literally and figuratively *translating* prison life for the non-prisoner reader. Drawing on existing scholarship of prisoner writing, and on studies of Holocaust life writing, I argue that theories from Translation Studies offer a valuable lens through which to consider the translational function of prisoner writing.

Writing from prison is often described as ‘prison writing’, yet this term comprises not only ‘writings of every sort by inmates’ but also ‘fictions written about prison experience’ (Carnochan 1998, 384). I therefore propose the term *prisoner writing*, drawing on Mary Brown’s term ‘prisoner art’ (2002, 42), as a more specific and accurate way to describe texts written by prisoners. While the term *prisoner* is reductive, it remains the most accurate way to describe the ‘subject position’ of the writers discussed in this article, who are united by their lived experience of imprisonment (Cox 2020, 8), and I thus employ the term *prisoner-writer* to describe such authors. My research centres on a specific form of carceral life writing where the prisoner-writer directly describes prison life to a *non-prisoner reader*, who does not have first-hand experience of prison, and this article examines how prisoner writing negotiates this epistemic gap between writer and reader.

In reading prisoner writing as translation, I focus on short stories written by UK prisoners, and discuss the prevalence within these texts of diegetic translators; characters in the story’s diegesis (narrative) who translate prison life. I analyse the strategies used by these translational characters to explain prison to their audience, and reflect on what these approaches reveal about the role of the prisoner-writer. In this paper, I first discuss the marginalisation of prisoner writing, then establish a theoretical framework for reading carceral texts as translation, before defining what I mean by diegetic translators. Employing close reading, I identify three types of diegetic translators, and discuss their position and function. I conclude by proposing that these texts can be termed *narratives of translators*, and reflect on how such narratives reveal the translational function of prisoner writing.

## The marginal position of prisoner writing

Prison is a marginal space that is physically and metaphorically removed from society, functioning as a ‘site of social or societal *otherness*’ and ‘spatial otherness’ (Fludernik and Olson 2004, xxviii), and rendering the prisoner a ‘carceral Other’ (Chartrand 2016, 63). This marginalising experience of imprisonment is disproportionately inflicted on those who are already marginalised in society, for example through gender, race, social class, or disability, as the transgressive prisoner is physically excluded and morally ostracised.

Given the marginalised status of prisoners, their writing is subject to multiple forms of marginalisation. Prison has long been idealised as a retreat from the distractions of life (Carnochan 1998, 396), yet imprisonment in fact presents significant practical, emotional, financial, legal, and creative obstacles to the prisoner who wishes to write, denying the prisoner ‘the power of writing’ (Foucault 1977, 189; discussed in Harlow 1987, 124–125), which rests instead with the prison system. The voices of some prisoners are more marginalised than others—specifically those already marginalised because of their race, gender or sexuality—who experience a ‘double marginality’ (Scheffler 2002,

xxii). When prisoners do write, the credibility of their writing is undermined by their criminal status (Hassine 1999, 41) and carceral texts seldom achieve mainstream publication (Westall 2021, 4). In the UK, work is typically published in small-scale anthologies or periodicals, via writing competitions organised by charities such as Koestler Arts, or through digital media or self-publishing. Prisoner writing can thus be characterised as a marginal form of life writing, produced by a marginal population, occupying a marginal position in society.

As a result, perhaps, of prisoner writing's marginal position in society, limited scholarly attention has been devoted to the genre, beyond historical figures like Thomas More, imprisoned authors such as Oscar Wilde, or political writers like Antonio Gramsci. The first major critical work to venture beyond this canon was H. Bruce Franklin's *Prison Writing in America* ([1978] 1989), which was followed by Ioan Davies's study *Writers in Prison* (1990). Building on these foundational works, further studies have centred on life writing from particular prisoner groups or carceral settings, including notably: political prisoners (Harlow 1987, 1992; Rodríguez 2006; Zim 2014); female prisoners (Scheffler [1986] 2002; Jacobi and Folwell Stanford 2014); historical prisoner writing (Haslam 2005; Haslam and Wright 2005; Ahnert 2013; Schwan 2014); and contemporary writing from the UK (Broadhead 2006), the USA (Chevigny 1999; Gaucher 1999; Miller 2005a; Olguín 2010), Canada (Rymhs 2009; Rymhs and Rimstead 2011), South Africa (Roux 2014, 2021; Steinberg 2021), and Latin America (Whitfield 2018). While scholars do not consistently describe prisoner writing as life writing, there are strong thematic and conceptual links between the two fields, and there have been several studies of carceral texts in the pages of this journal (for example: Rymhs 2009; Danielewicz 2012, Roux 2014; Powell 2018; Schandevyl 2018). Scholarship of prisoner writing remains limited, however, and there is a notable gap around contemporary carceral life writing, particularly in the UK, which this paper seeks to address.

### Theorising prisoner writing as translation

A significant factor in the marginalisation of the prisoner is their physical removal from society, and much has been made of the dichotomy between prison space and the wider world. Historically, the divide between inside and outside was considered absolute, with prison functioning as a 'total institution' that contains the prisoner, while also prohibiting interaction with the outside world (Goffman 1961, 15). In recent years, however, this division has been challenged, with the prison boundary instead theorised as a heterogeneous 'patchwork' (Turner 2016, 230) that is 'porous, permeable, interpenetrated' (Moran 2015, 102). Prison is an Other space, removed from mainstream society, yet the boundary is not absolute, and there is interaction between inside and outside. While the prison boundary is not impenetrable, public knowledge of prison life remains limited, and prison society interacts with mainstream society via a complex system of 'economic, political and (importantly) cultural negotiations' (Turner 2016, 228). Prisoner writing represents one such negotiation, as the prisoner-writer bears witness to the hidden experience of imprisonment (Lopez 2005, 63). Prisoner writing thus represents an opportunity for accounts of prison life to cross the prison boundary, to the outside world.

In writing about prison life, the prisoner-writer therefore ‘bridges the divide between the world inside prison and the world outside’ (Shabazz 2014, 588), an act that requires them to ‘mediate separate worlds’ (Miller 2005b, 17). Ioan Davies likens this mediation to translation, which he describes as ‘in many respects the central theme of prison writing’, as the prisoner-writer translates ‘from one set of social and philosophical assumptions into another’ (1990, 5). Other scholars have likewise alluded to translation in their discussion of prisoner writing (Brodsky 1996, xii; Dimitriu 2000, 94; Chakkalakal 2005, 88), but neither they nor Davies elaborate on the idea.

While scholarship of prisoner writing as translation has been limited, there is useful research in the related discipline of Holocaust literature, where scholars posit that the attempt to render into language the unspeakable trauma of the Holocaust constitutes an act of translation (Alexander 2007; Arnds 2012; Glowacka 2012; Finch 2015).<sup>1</sup> Holocaust survivors attempt to bear witness to an experience that ‘cannot be properly articulated, since no national language has been able to absorb it or to coin words and expressions capable of conveying its catastrophic dimensions’ (Glowacka 2012, 63), and prisoner writing similarly represents ‘an urgent struggle to speak of experiences formerly perceived as taboo, unspeakable, or otherwise resistant to story’ (Lopez 2005, 64). The drive to bear witness to a traumatic and indescribable experience, the need to mediate between cultural systems, and the requirement to translate distinct linguistic systems are common to both Holocaust testimony and prisoner writing. This suggests that translation provides a useful lens through which to read prisoner writing, and that the investigation of carceral life writing as translation should involve the application of concepts from Translation Studies.

Translation Studies offers a considerable body of critical thinking about cultural production and consumption, with a well-established precedent for interdisciplinary application. Contemporary translation theory operates from the position that translation is more than the transfer between languages—it is also about culture, context, mediation, and interpretation. The translator translates not only language but also culture, transferring cultural references, history, beliefs and norms. Translations are neither created nor received in a vacuum (Bassnett and Lefevere 1998, 3), and should always be considered in terms of the context of what is being translated, why, when, by whom, and for whom. The transfer between cultural contexts can be viewed as an act of mediation (Hatim and Mason 1990, 223), with the translator functioning as a facilitator, transmitting meaning from one language and culture to another. In doing so, the translator forms an interpretation of the source, which they render into the target text (Steiner [1975] 1998, 28–29; Hatim and Mason 1990, 224), serving as first reader, then writer. In conceptualising prisoner writing as translation, this study defines translation not as a purely linguistic act, but as a hermeneutic process of mediation between cultures and contexts.

Accordingly, in theorising prisoner writing as translation, I propose that carceral texts mediate between the prison and non-prison worlds. The discipline of carceral geography has been instrumental in conceptualising prison space, mapping the divisions and continuities that exist between inside and outside, and describing how the prison boundary can be physically and figuratively traversed by prisoners, staff, visitors, goods, tourism, artwork, and labour (Turner 2016). I propose that a similar boundary crossing is offered by prisoner writing, as information, experiences, language and cultural practices travel from prison to the outside world, forging connections between the geographically

separate spaces of inside and outside. In interrogating these literary crossings of the carceral boundary, I draw on studies of border writing and translation. Issues of translation are inherent in border spaces: borders are places where languages and cultures meet and merge; texts stemming from such spaces are often multilingual and multicultural, necessitating translation; and translation is a common trope in border writing (Gentzler 2008, 143, 145). Carceral texts emerge from a similarly multilingual and multicultural encounter, as prisoners cross the prison boundary into prison, gaining knowledge of carceral language and culture, which blends with their pre-prison linguistic and cultural experiences. Gentzler describes translation as ‘fundamental’ to the identities of those who live in geographical border regions (165), and this study therefore conceives of prison as a liminal, translational space, and proposes that the prisoner adopts a translational role in mediating between prison and non-prison life.

This traversing of physical borders is accompanied by non-geographical forms of boundary crossing. Fiona Doloughan examines writing stemming from ‘literal and metaphoric border-crossings’ by writers who have crossed ‘linguistic, cultural, [and] social’ borders (2016, 2) and who are thus ‘living in translation’ (12). Doloughan proposes that texts by such authors can be described as ‘narratives of translation’, which she defines as ‘works that thematize, narrativize and/or are structured around, questions of language, cultural identity and what it means to translate oneself or one’s culture’ (79). The border crossing imposed by imprisonment is not just geographical but also social, as the prisoner is banished from society and labelled a deviant Other. This project therefore draws on Gentzler’s and Doloughan’s descriptions of literary boundary crossings to conceptualise the position of the prisoner-writer, who has crossed the literal and figurative border into prison and now writes back across this boundary. Drawing specifically on Doloughan’s research, I consider how such writers foreground translation in their writing to produce carceral ‘narratives of translation’ that translate prison life for the non-prisoner reader.

### Diegetic translators

In considering the translational role of the prisoner-writer, I build on Doloughan’s theory of ‘narratives of translation’ (2016, 79), produced by multilingual and/or multicultural authors who are ‘living in translation’ (12). This model is applicable to the prisoner, who translates the language and culture of prison on a daily basis, and to the prisoner-writer, who writes back across the prison boundary, translating between the prison and non-prison worlds. In discussing translational narratives, Doloughan describes how the narrator of *Exit Into History* by Eva Hoffman and the protagonist of *I Am China* by Xiaolu Guo both serve as translators for other characters and the reader (Doloughan 2016, 47, 29). This suggests that a feature of these translational texts, written by authors whose identity and existence is shaped by translation, is the inclusion of *diegetic translators*, who act as translators within the story’s narrative or ‘diegesis’.

Drawing on Doloughan’s discussion of diegetic translators, this article examines the presence of similar translator figures in prisoner writing. My analysis focuses on a corpus of 96 short stories about prison, written by prisoners, and published between 1990 and 2018, via prisoner writing competitions organised by the charities Koestler Arts and the Prison Reform Trust, or in the journal *Prison Writing*. Diegetic translators are a recurring trope, featuring in one-third of these stories, suggesting that prisoner

writing fulfils Doloughan's definition of narratives of translation. Crucially, Doloughan makes the link between the translation-focused lives of her chosen authors and the translational nature of their work, suggesting that authors manifest their own life experiences in these translator figures. Many texts in my corpus feature a narrator or protagonist who is a prisoner, yet, in the absence of paratextual biographical information, I do not know how closely these texts mirror the lives of their authors.<sup>2</sup> However, it is my contention that an analysis of these diegetic translators can provide important insights into the role of the prisoner-writer.

These short stories contain three types of characters who act as translators of prison life, for other characters and for the reader. The most common type of translator is the *experienced prisoner*, who is either a career criminal who has served multiple prison sentences, or a prisoner serving a long sentence. These prisoners draw on their insider status to explain prison life for an audience who has less knowledge of prison—this may be a diegetic character such as a newer prisoner or external visitor, or the text may be addressed to the non-prisoner reader. These experienced prisoners can be first-person narrators, speaking directly to the reader and translating the prison for them, or their translation may be relayed by a third-person narrator. Alongside experienced prisoners, my corpus contains texts featuring a *new prisoner* who describes their experience of entering prison for the first time, translating the foreign world in which they find themselves. These stories are generally told directly to the reader, via first-person narration, and the central character is often a white-collar prisoner or 'straight', with little experience of the criminal justice system. The final type of translator figure is the *supernatural figure*, who is generally the ghost of a deceased prisoner. Such characters translate aspects of prison for long-serving prisoners, drawing on their supernatural knowledge to impart wisdom that surpasses that of even the most experienced prisoner, thereby also translating for the reader. These characters all occupy a position of superior knowledge to their audience, which can be likened to that of the translator. Experienced prisoners explain the prison to newer prisoners or to non-prisoners, new prisoners describe prison life to the reader, and spectral figures draw on their supernatural knowledge to explain imprisonment to other prisoners. Across these combinations of translator and audience, the resulting knowledge gradient allows the author to explain prison life to the reader, with the translator figure speaking directly to the reader or to another character.

The position of these characters, who have the necessary knowledge to explain the prison to a less knowledgeable audience, mirrors that of the translator, who possesses the ability to understand a language or culture that their audience does not. There has been much discussion in Translation Studies of the marginalised role of the translator, which is not dissimilar to the marginalisation of prisoners and their writing. Translation was historically viewed as an inferior cultural practice compared to original composition, with translated texts presented as originals, rendering the translator invisible (Venuti [1995] 2018). There is distrust of both prisoners and translators, with prisoner-writers positioned as untrustworthy because of their criminal status. In translation, issues of trust derive from the fear that the translator may misrepresent the original text, expressed in metaphors of two-facedness, divided loyalties, betrayal, and infidelity (Hanne 2007, 216, 218). Such distrust is compounded by the ability of the translator, and prisoner-writer, to understand a language and culture that is Other, conferring on them a degree of otherness.



Indeed, the translator is often described as existing *between* cultures, a metaphor that Maria Tymoczko challenges on the basis that it places the translator outside either culture, rightly asserting that the translator does not speak from a cultural and ideological ‘elsewhere’ ([2002] 2010, 217). Tymoczko’s definition of ‘between’ as ‘elsewhere’ is questionable, however, and I instead reinterpret the idea of ‘between’ to refer to the liminality and hybridity of the translator’s role, operating from a multicultural borderland that confers on them a hybrid cultural identity. There are parallels with the liminality of the prisoner, who is at once cast ‘outside’ society and detained ‘inside’ the prison (Turner 2016, 48), holding them ‘neither in nor out of everyday society’ (89). I propose that ‘between’ is a fitting description of the prisoner-writer, who draws on their liminal position at the interface between prison and non-prison culture, adopting a hybrid inside/outside cultural identity.

Crucially, the position of the translator ‘between’ languages and cultures represents an advantage over the reader, who cannot understand the language and culture being translated. The translator’s multilingual and multicultural position thereby affords them relative power over their audience, and constitutes what Ovidio Carbonell describes as a ‘privileged cultural outpost’ (1996, 82). While the experience of prison is one of deprivation rather than privilege, the translators in my corpus possess an understanding of a culture that is unknown to their audience, and they draw upon this ‘epistemic privilege’ (Whitfield 2018, 32) to explain the carceral experience. At the same time, they must actively work to counter the reader’s inherent distrust of their criminal status and intermediary role, taking steps to establish their authority and credibility to translate prison life.

### **‘Please believe me’: experienced prisoner translators**

Experienced prisoner translators typically demonstrate their credibility by emphasising their familiarity and affinity with prison and its culture, positioning themselves as experts compared to the non-prisoner reader. A common technique is for characters to highlight the amount of time they have spent imprisoned: the narrator of *The Night I Met Satan* by Noel ‘Razor’ Smith refers to ‘my years incarcerated’ (1999, 22) and the ‘many police and prison cells’ in which he has been held (29); the character Mac in *Dear Stephen*, written by Martin Tattersall, is serving ‘15 for a proper armed blag’, having previously served ‘an eight and a couple of short ones’ (2002, 120); and the character Wee Joe Burke in *Born in Captivity* has spent ‘More or less ma’ full life’ in children’s homes, young offender institutions or prisons (PRT11/6 2011, 3).

Characters may also stress the number of institutions in which they have been held, such as the narrator of *Indian Summer*, also by Smith, who is held in Whitemoor and recalls his time ‘in a top-security prison on the Isle of Wight’ (2002, 106). Similarly, the narrator of *Duffy and the Devil’s Dandruff* by Peter Wayne relates his experiences ‘in the Gothic doom and gloom, of Manchester Strangeways’ (1997, 21), ‘the severe Italianate classicism of Wandsworth’ (21), ‘Wormwood Scrubs, where in 1990 I was awaiting trial for robbing a series of building societies’ (25), and ‘Blundeston Prison [...] home to me for a traumatic six months last year’ (25). The inclusion of the notorious Victorian-era prisons Strangeways, Wandsworth and Wormwood Scrubs reinforces the narrator’s credentials as a carceral expert. The story *Pipe Dreams* by Mark Powell fuses both techniques in its opening paragraph:

Changes in routine annoyed George. They disrupted the flow of his thoughts. It was not so long ago, he reflected, that he would have been up before dawn, washed, dressed and ready for breakfast. But in the last year things had changed. It was his seventh year at Wandsworth and his thirtieth in prison. (Powell 1997, 44)

George's status as an experienced prisoner is made clear through the references to the time he has served and the implication that he has been held in several prisons, which is made explicit subsequently. The time these prisoners have served, and the number of institutions in which they have been held, signals their extensive experience of the prison system, giving them the necessary credentials to be experts on prison life.

At the same time, however, these credentials come with an admission of criminality, with the prisoner's criminal status and resulting imprisonment positioning them as Other to the non-prisoner reader and to mainstream society. Several characters are open about their offences; in the quote above, the narrator of *Duffy and the Devil's Dandruff* admits to a number of robberies, and the narrator of *Who Do You Love?*, another story by Noel 'Razor' Smith, gives extensive details of the 'nice little scam' that got him arrested (1996, 68). The experienced prisoner John Murphy, in Robert Robb's story *Normal Life*, openly admits his offence to the prison chaplain, Reverend Wakely, who is also his brother:

Impatiently the chaplain broke in. 'So, what's the charge this time? Burglary?'

The con looked slightly surprised, 'Hadn't you heard? Oh yeah, you wouldn't have twigged, what with my new name. I'm the Main Street Murderer.'

'What?' the chaplain gulped. 'You're charged with murder?'

The word hung heavy and cold in the cell air.

'Don't talk soft. I'm convicted of manslaughter. Wasn't my fault, y'see—I was all "massied" up.' The prisoner was a bit disappointed that his case wasn't better known. (Robb 1999, 75–76)

John's status as a repeat offender establishes his dual position as an expert on prison life and a criminal Other. The contrast between John's nonchalant attitude to his offences, and the shocked reaction of his chaplain brother, a point of view character for the non-prisoner reader, further emphasises his otherness. While such tales of imprisonment and criminality establish these experienced prisoners as appropriate translators of prison, their admissions also render them Other to the non-prisoner reader, undermining their credibility. Just as the multilingual and multicultural position of the translator may provoke distrust in the monolingual and monocultural reader, the insider position of these characters affords them the authority to translate but also signals their otherness.

These experienced prisoner translators must therefore combat the non-prisoner reader's potential distrust of their criminality, if they are to translate prison life. A number of texts feature first-person narrators who openly challenge the reader's distrust. Extant research in narratology examines features of the narrator's position, such as knowledge and reliability, that are not dissimilar to issues surrounding the role of the translator, and Gérard Genette's typology of narrator functions (1980) is particularly relevant to this discussion. The narrator of *Who Do You Love?* by Noel 'Razor' Smith

discusses the potential for mental health breakdowns among prisoners, and uses the ‘function of communication’ (Genette 1980, 256) to address the reader directly, commenting: ‘please believe me when I tell you that this sort of occurrence is far from uncommon behind the walls of HMP’ (Smith 1996, 70). The narrator uses the ‘testimonial function’ (Genette 1980, 256) to make a direct appeal for the reader’s trust, saying ‘please believe me’, while also emphasising both his knowledge of prison, exemplified in his statement that such incidents are ‘far from uncommon’, and his distance from the reader, with the reference ‘behind the walls’. There is a similar testimonial appeal at the end of *The Night I Met Satan*, which ends with the line ‘Stay out of prison, it is safer. Believe me’ (Smith 1999, 29), which also fulfils the ‘ideological function’ of instructing the reader (Genette 1980, 256). Smith favours first-person narration in his writing, and such direct addresses are a common feature of his stories, helping to counter the reader’s potential distrust.

While these are the most overt appeals within my corpus for the reader’s trust, it is more usual for experienced prisoners to establish their trustworthiness by performing in ways that demonstrate their knowledge of prison early in their narration. *Prisoners’ Den* opens with a description of prison tattooist ‘Tattoo John’, whose ‘improvised tattoo gun is made from an empty pen tube, the motor from an old stereo and some guitar string’, producing tattoos that ‘can be seen on prisoners all over the country’ (14K0032 2014, 1). The narrator demonstrates his inside knowledge of how prison works, giving technical details of the improvised tattoo gun, and also aligns himself to the wider prison population with his reference to ‘prisoners all over the country’, a technique not dissimilar to the recounting of previous prisons. Several stories feature experienced prisoners who translate prison norms for other prisoners, such as Simon Tasker’s *Loose Hands of Friendship*, in which the narrator begins the story with the statement ‘There are many ways in which a man can do his time’ (2001, 90), before listing the ways that a new prisoner may adapt to prison life, displaying from the outset his superior understanding of prison. *Duffy and the Devil’s Dandruff* opens with the young prisoner Duffy asking the more experienced narrator for advice about his mandatory drugs test (Wayne 1997, 20), thereby establishing the narrator as knowledgeable and trustworthy. Similarly, in *Pipe Dreams*, long-serving prisoner and amateur historian George describes how prisoners working in the garden ‘who had dug up an old tobacco box or some other relic’ bring the item to George to ‘hear his explanation of its history’ (Powell 1997, 47). These experienced prisoners are presented as experts on prison life, and therefore as reliable sources for the reader. The experienced prisoner emphasises their criminal otherness by demonstrating their knowledge of the prison, but must also counter this otherness by presenting themselves as trustworthy and credible.

### **‘First time inside’: new prisoner translators**

Alongside these experienced prisoner translators, a number of texts feature prisoners who are new to prison, who translate prison life for the reader, using first-person narration. Unlike experienced prisoners, who demonstrate their familiarity with the carceral landscape and its routines, these new prisoner translators occupy a liminal position in relation to the prison, contained within its walls but unfamiliar with its norms. The moment of sentencing marks these prisoners as criminal Others, removing them from

normal society. On being sentenced, the narrator of *Victim Support*, by Ian Watson, remarks of the previously friendly court official ‘his attitude has changed’ (2002, 31), while the narrator of *Maybe Tomorrow* notes that the judge switches to using his surname only when sentencing him, without the title ‘Mr’ (18K0253 2018, 1). Following sentencing, the liminal state of the new prisoner, crossing from society to prison, is emphasised by references to thresholds, doors, windows and walls. *The Slammer* opens with the line ‘Cold, dented metal door closes behind and not before my naked body cloaked in grey ... Slam!’ (18K2158 2018, 1), and also describes ‘One, two, three, four featureless walls and that metal door’, the door’s ‘rectangular slot’, and the window’s ‘hole in the wall’ (1). The narrator of *Maybe Tomorrow* describes the succession of spaces through which he travels, passing ‘along the length of a passageway, partially outside but under a canopy roof, to a large cell block. Block 2, wing B, cell 17’ (18K0253 2018, 15), and the narrator of *Inside Out* likewise travels through a ‘door’, several ‘doors and gates’, ‘another gate and door’, a ‘gate’ and ‘another gate’, before arriving in a cell with ‘a window that couldn’t open’ (PRT18/4 2018, 2).

The crossing of these physical thresholds is echoed by the transformational prison reception process, which is outlined in *Maybe Tomorrow*:

Have a photo taken; our finger and thumb prints added to the computerised security system; an ID card issued; a talk with the nurse; be strip searched and kitted out with prison wear; handed a bed pack of sheets, towel, soap, toothbrush, toothpaste and toilet paper. (18K0253 2018, 13)

This process marks the transition from freedom to imprisonment, echoing the liminal transitional phase of a rite of passage, during which the subject is held in a threshold state without possessions, status, or even clothing (Turner 1969, 95). The ‘admission procedure’ is identified by Goffman as a defining feature of the total institution (1961, 27) and is a common trope of prisoner writing (Carrabine 2010, 21). This emphasis on physical and cultural thresholds reinforces the cultural liminality of the new prisoner, positioning them between prison and mainstream culture, allowing them to translate prison from a hybrid perspective that echoes that of the translator.

In acting as the translator of prison life, the new prisoner capitalises on their liminality to establish their credibility as a knowledgeable and trustworthy source of information for the reader. They demonstrate these credentials first by establishing that they are new to prison. The narrator’s new prisoner status is explicit in the title of the text *My First Days in Prison* (16K0821 2016, 1), and the narrator of *Prison Works* states that it is his ‘first time inside’ (PRT11/3 2011, 1). Other texts are less explicit, with several characters signalling their new prisoner status by their confused reaction to receiving a prison sentence. In *No Complaints* by Daniel Laugh, the narrator describes his reaction to his sentence: ‘My heart stopped. I walked down to the cells, shaking. Shock had taken over completely. This could not be happening. Prison!’ (1994, 31). The narrator’s bewilderment at his newly confirmed criminal sentence is conveyed by his physical shock at the verdict. The narrator of *Maybe Tomorrow* is similarly confused, saying that ‘I cannot really remember what the judge said to me as he passed sentence’ (18K0253 2018, 1), while the narrator of *Victim Support* is so shocked by his sentence that he only recalls ‘a few phrases in the summing up, “public protection”, “sending out a message to others”, and then the final phrase, “18 months—take him down”’

(Watson 2002, 31). These characters' lack of understanding marks them out as new prisoners and positions them as different from other prisoners, and this confusion continues as they enter prison. In *Leaves on the Line*, the narrator is unfamiliar with how to roll cigarettes, and must be shown by his cellmate the 'crisp, practised series of motions that efficiently delivered a perfectly rolled cigarette' (18K2594 2018, 6–7), while the narrator of *Maybe Tomorrow* goes thirsty as he is 'unsure whether the water from the tap is good for drinking' and has no cellmate to ask (18K0253 2018, 16). As 'straights' who have not previously served prison sentences, these new prisoners demonstrate their inability to navigate carceral life, showing that, although they are imprisoned, they lack the habitual criminality attributed to more experienced prisoners.

Indeed, while these new prisoners make clear that they have crossed the boundary into prison, they also present their fellow prisoners as Other, thereby positioning themselves closer to their non-prisoner readers. The narrator of *Maybe Tomorrow* views his lack of cellmate as positive, stating that 'I really don't feel ready to meet another "unknown" inmate' (18K0253 2018, 15), positioning himself as physically and socially removed from other prisoners. A number of characters make the distinction between themselves and the 'other prisoners' (Laugh 1994, 32; 16K0821 2016, 1) or 'other inmates' (PRT11/3 2011, 2; 18K0253 2018, 16), with the narrator of *No Complaints* lamenting: 'I am a skinny four-eyed wimp! The truth of it was simple. I would last five minutes. If that. I was going to die. Murdered as soon as I got there' (Laugh 1994, 31). The narrator's belief in his unsuitability for prison highlights the distance between himself and other prisoners, and by extension portrays those prisoners as threatening, uneducated, violent thugs. By dissociating themselves from their fellow prisoners, and depicting them as the criminal Other, these new prisoners emphasise their 'straight' credentials and align themselves with the non-prisoner reader.

In a small number of cases, this parallel between new prisoner and reader has a positive result, as the new prisoner subsequently forms friendships with other prisoners. The elderly widower narrator of *Victim Support*, imprisoned for accidentally discharging a firearm, initially finds prison life bewildering and his fellow prisoners intimidating. However, he ultimately finds in prison the support and friendship that was lacking outside prison, commenting: 'I had a new circle of friends' (Watson 2002, 34). Where the narrator's son is absent, his lawyer disinterested and his GP ineffectual, the ageing narrator finds supportive friends in prison, who continue to look after him after his (and their) release. The friendship between the other prisoners and this 'straight' narrator, who is aligned to the reader, suggests that the prisoner is not a foreign Other, but a relatable no-Other that is closer to the Self (Carbonell i Cortés 2003, 157). However, in the majority of cases no such familiarising link is made by these new prisoners, who emphasise their 'straight' credentials by othering their fellow prisoners, occupying a liminal position where they are in prison but remain more closely aligned to the outside world, and to the non-prisoner reader.

### **'I have my ways': supernatural translators**

In addition to these diegetic prisoner translators, a smaller number of texts feature supernatural characters, such as ghosts, who act as translators. The majority of these figures are ghosts of deceased prisoners, as in *Barred Citizens—Right to Vote* (PRT11/1 2011),

*The Listener* (PRT11/7 2011) and *Stranger Than Fiction* (Wrigglesworth 1999), while *Every Passing Moment* (PRT14/1 2014) sees a prisoner visited by his future self, and *The Lonely Vigil* (18K0699 2018) is narrated by a deceased Victorian prison warder. The ghost has been proposed as a metaphor for the translator and interpreter (Hanne 2007, 214–215), and descriptions of the prison are similarly spectral. Drawing on Achille Mbembe’s concept of ‘necropolitics’, whereby excluded segments of the population are reduced to ‘the status of *living dead*’ (2003, 40), the experience of imprisonment has been described as a form of uncanny live burial in which prisoners become ‘ghosts, zombies or monsters’ (Fredriksson 2018, 2), and the ghost metaphor has likewise been applied to prison officers (Liebling 2000, 337). The supernatural diegetic translators in my corpus thus bring together spectral metaphors of the prisoner and the translator. Given that the majority of these translator figures translate for experienced prisoners who are already intimately familiar with the carceral environment, these translators impart knowledge and insights gained using their supernatural abilities. Several texts use this device to discuss moral or philosophical aspects of prison life, as the translator figure draws on their superior knowledge to translate for the experienced prisoner, and thereby also for the reader.

Like the diegetic prisoner translators discussed above, these supernatural characters must demonstrate that they have the authority to act as translators of prison life. In all of these texts, the supernatural nature of the diegetic translator is not initially made explicit—for example, the narrator of *Stranger Than Fiction*, by John Wrigglesworth (1999), believes he is meeting his new cellmate, who is later revealed to be the ghost of a prisoner who was hanged in 1954. Similarly, the character Jonesy in *The Listener* (PRT11/7 2011) is visited by a prison Listener—a prisoner who volunteers on a peer-support scheme run by the Samaritans—who is ultimately revealed to be a ghost. However, there are hints that these supernatural characters are not what they seem, imbuing them with a sense of otherness. This otherness is often spatial, with characters appearing or disappearing in ways that defy the spatial rules of prison. In *Barred Citizens—Right to Vote*, the prisoner Robert awakens to find a woman in his cell, who is later revealed to be the ghost of formerly imprisoned suffragette Emmeline Pankhurst. When confronted with this nocturnal visitor, Robert immediately asks ‘how did you get in?’ and is told ‘I have my ways’ (PRT11/1 2011, 1). *Every Passing Moment* uses a similar device, as prisoner Ricky Blake awakens to see a man standing in his cell, later revealed to be Ricky’s future self, and thinks to himself that ‘he definitely hadn’t heard the door open or close’ (PRT14/1 2014, 1). Likewise, when the narrator of *Stranger Than Fiction* wakes up to find that his new cellmate has disappeared, he thinks to himself ‘That was strange. I hadn’t heard the door open when they let him out’ (Wrigglesworth 1999, 34). This ability to pass through prison walls is made explicit at the end of *The Listener*, as suicidal prisoner Jonesy kills himself and joins the ghostly Listener Chris, floating out of his cell ‘through barred windows, razor wire and the prison gates’ (PRT11/7 2011, 4). In *The Lonely Vigil*, the ghostly Victorian prison warder, George White, repeatedly hints at his supernatural powers, explaining that he can ‘pass unchallenged’, ‘pass outside unnoticed’ and ‘pass through unhindered and unnoticed’ (18K0699 2018, 1). The ability of these supernatural figures to move at will within the tightly controlled space of the prison affords them access to places that are normally out of reach, presenting them as experts on prison life. At the same time, their capacity to pass through walls and doors positions them

as spatially liminal, echoing the liminal existence of the ghost between life and death, and signalling their otherness to their audience and the reader.

Just as these characters can enter spaces that are off-limits, they also have access to hidden knowledge and experiences. In *The Lonely Vigil*, George White remembers details of the prison that were common knowledge in the past but are unknown to contemporary prison staff and prisoners, signalling his position as the holder of privileged information with the repeated phrase ‘I know’. He claims ‘*I know* intimately every inch of this stone and metal fortress’; he describes the prisoners who are buried in the prison grounds, remarking ‘No gravestones mark their presence but *I know* that they are here’; and he discusses the presence of a secret tunnel under the prison, saying ‘*I alone know* where the entrance lies’ (18K0699 2018, 1—emphasis added). In *Barred Citizens—Right to Vote*, the ghost of Emmeline Pankhurst likewise signals her supernatural knowledge, comparing the contemporary prison with her recollections of her own imprisonment a century before:

She sipped her tea, the mug held firmly between gloved hands. ‘The tea has improved greatly in these places.’

‘Have you been here before?’

‘In places similar, too frequently.’

I looked closely at the woman, so demure and refined, and wondered how she could know such deprivation. (PRT11/1 2011, 1)

Pankhurst references the fact that prison tea was historically brewed in large quantities, creating a poor-quality drink known as ‘diesel’, whereas prisoners now typically receive a tea pack and kettle with which to brew their own drinks (Smith 2015, 183). Her references to these practices firstly signal that she has experience of prison, despite her ‘demure and refined’ middle-class appearance, but also make clear that she has knowledge beyond that of the prisoner to whom she speaks. Other supernatural characters reveal details of a more personal nature; in *Every Passing Moment*, Ricky is perplexed that someone he has only just met (his future self) knows the length of his sentence, asking ‘how do you know I’ve done a six?’ (PRT14/1 2014, 1), while the narrator of *Stranger Than Fiction* is confused to learn that his new cellmate has received the death penalty, commenting: ‘He didn’t look old enough to have been around when hanging was given out’ (Wrigglesworth 1999, 33). These supernatural figures demonstrate their ability to translate the prison by sharing knowledge that would usually be off-limits, thereby also marking them as Other to other prisoners and to the reader.

While such tactics allow these supernatural figures to signal their authority to translate prison life, this resulting sense of otherness can again spark distrust. The narrator of *Stranger Than Fiction* says of his spectral cellmate’s claim that he was sentenced to hang: ‘Either he was the best-preserved lifer in the system or he was a liar’ (Wrigglesworth 1999, 33). In *Barred Citizens—Right to Vote*, Robert dismisses his nocturnal visitor as a dream, commenting: ‘it could not be, it was not possible’ (PRT11/1 2011, 2). Ricky Blake is sceptical that he is talking to his future self, signalled by his multiple questions: ‘What are you trying to do, mess with my head or something?’ (PRT14/1 2014, 1), ‘How can this be?’ (2), and ‘Do you seriously expect me to believe all this?’ (2). In

contrast, Jonesy in *The Listener* relates his general distrust of prisoners who volunteer as Listeners, commenting that he was ‘usually sceptical about these jokers’, but feels that Chris is different, wondering to himself: ‘This one though ...?’ (PRT11/7 2011, 2). The reversal of Jonesy’s habitual distrust signals Chris’s otherness, although Jonesy remains unsure of his motives. The distrust of these supernatural figures, resulting from their status as Other, echoes the distrust resulting from the criminality of the experienced prisoner.

These supernatural figures therefore offer evidence to counter this distrust, and cement their credibility as carceral translators. In *Every Passing Moment*, this evidence takes the form of a tattoo, through which Ricky’s future self proves his identity:

The man shook his head then pulled up his sleeve to reveal a tattoo of a pair of fluffy dice on his forearm. Blake pulled up his own sleeve to reveal the still red and blotchy tattoo he’d had done just yesterday—a pair of fluffy dice. For the first time in his life he was totally speechless. (PRT14/1 2014, 2)

The presence of the tattoo, an individual and permanent mark, proves to Ricky that his visitor is credible, signalled by the fact that his previous incredulous questions are replaced by silence. The supernatural figures in *Stranger Than Fiction* and *Barred Citizens—Right to Vote* also offer evidence to corroborate their stories and demonstrate their credibility, in the form of objects that remain after their departure. In the former story, the narrator awakens to find that his cellmate has disappeared but left behind a candleholder, of a type not used in the prison for many years (Wrigglesworth 1999, 34). In the latter text, Emmeline Pankhurst hands Robert ‘an old, leather-bound book’ (PRT11/1 2011, 1), which he finds under his pillow in the morning:

It was a book, old and leather-bound.

I opened the cover and on the front page written in a fine hand, it read, ‘Robert, if it is right, then fight for it. Emmeline’

I closed the cover and read the title. ‘My Own Story,’ by Emmeline Pankhurst. (PRT11/1 2011, 2)

*The Lonely Vigil* ends with similar textual evidence, as the ghostly narrator reveals ‘a plaque of tarnished, neglected brass’ that reads: ‘Here fell Gaoler George White, 16th November 1883. Departed this life while executing his duties and now maintains a lone vigil’ (18K0699 2018, 2). This physical evidence, whether in the form of a tattoo, a historical object or a text, backs up these characters’ stories, proves their supernatural status, and cements their credibility as translators of the prison. Like the experienced prisoner and new prisoner translators, these supernatural diegetic translators must work to establish their authority to translate prison life, demonstrating how the prisoner-writer seeks to counter the distrust stemming from their position as Other to the non-prisoner reader.

### Narratives of translators

Given the prevalence and prominence of diegetic translators in prisoner writing, I propose that carceral life writing fulfils Doloughan’s definition of ‘narratives of translation’ (2016, 79). More specifically, I suggest that these texts can be termed *narratives*



of *translators*, as texts that foreground the translational role of the writer, and reflect directly on the writer's own practice. In viewing these diegetic translators as a reflection of the carceral authorial process, my reading of these texts reveals the translational role of the prisoner-writer, and offers insights into how these writers conceptualise their position as the translator of prison life.

Drawing on extant research into the role of the translator, my analysis shows that the diegetic translators in my corpus write from a position of privileged carceral knowledge, which confers on them the authority to translate the prison, but also renders them Other to their audience, casting doubt on their credibility. Like these diegetic translators, the prisoner-writer occupies a position of epistemic privilege versus non-prisoner readers, yet may similarly be viewed as an untrustworthy Other by virtue of their criminal past, mirroring the reader's potential distrust of the translator. While it may be tempting to view the prisoner-writer and the translator as marginalised, invisible figures, both roles possess privileged knowledge that affords them power over the reader. Indeed, of the translators in my corpus, it is those who are most Other—career criminals, long-serving prisoners, uncannily supernatural figures—who possess the greatest knowledge of prison, inverting conventional definitions of privilege. These figures navigate the unfamiliar carceral world with ease, while their less experienced diegetic audiences, and the non-prisoner reader, lack the necessary knowledge to do so, casting the non-prisoner as the anomalous Other in the prison setting. The relationship between these translator figures and their audiences is thus not a simple binary of Other and Self. Experienced prisoners and supernatural figures initially emphasise their otherness and then take steps to counter the reader's distrust, while, in contrast, new prisoners cast their fellow prisoners as Other, in an attempt to align themselves with the non-prisoner reader. This suggests that, while it is tempting to view the prisoner-writer as a marginalised Other, akin to the 'invisible' translator, prisoner-writers in fact have power over their readers, which they use to reconfigure the Self-Other binary.

Just as the translator works across linguistic and cultural boundaries, a key characteristic of the various translator figures in these stories, and of the prisoner-writer, is their ability to cross boundaries. Excluded from society, these diegetic translators speak across spatial, social and supernatural borders, offering insights into prison life. The prisoner-writer similarly draws on their multilingual and multicultural position *between* the prison and non-prison worlds, to write back across the prison boundary. Recalling the mediating function of the translator, the diegetic translators in prisoner writing fulfil a similar mediating role, providing the reader with a helpful guide who can explain the foreign language and culture of prison, helping them to navigate the unfamiliar carceral world. Likewise, prisoner-writers guide their readers through the peculiarities of prison life, mediating between the worlds inside and outside prison, in order to convey their personal carceral life experiences to the non-prisoner reader.

While the prisoner-writer faces unique practical and philosophical challenges in attempting to bear witness to prison life, there are parallels with the wider life writing genre. The life writer mediates between Self and Other, translating subjective, personal experience into a format that is accessible to their audience, crossing spatial, cultural, linguistic, temporal, and experiential boundaries. Translation Studies offers a well-established body of thinking on how meaning can be transferred between contexts, through processes of mediation and interpretation. Just as a translational reading of prisoner

writing offers new insights into the neglected genre of prisoner writing, a translational reading of life writing may offer fresh perspectives into the role of the life writer in translating personal experience into textual form.

## Notes

1. Concepts from Translation Studies have been applied to other areas of life writing; notably writing by ethnic minority and migrant communities (Cutter 2005; Karpinski 2012). Edwin Gentzler discusses the translational processes of rewriting personal experience in his analysis of Proust (Gentzler 2016, 149).
2. Access to charity archives was on an anonymous basis, and I therefore use reference numbers to cite archival texts, in the format '18K0123' for Koestler Arts and 'PRT18/1' for Prison Reform Trust, alongside using author names for texts published in *Prison Writing*. I quote texts directly where possible, sometimes at length, and I do not correct or signpost typographical errors except for clarity. Although the titles of anthologised short stories would typically be cited in inverted commas and the titles of archive texts would be italicised, I italicise the titles of all short stories in my corpus, for ease of reading and to avoid creating a hierarchy between sources.

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