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Pursuing the Horizon of Penal Abolition in Seth Kwame Boateng's Documentaries

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Abstract

Two recent documentaries by award-winning journalist Seth Kwame Boateng, *Locked and Forgotten* (2015) and *Left to Rot* (2016), have played an important role in recent Ghanaian prison reform efforts. This paper identifies the ways these documentaries extend beyond a reformist agenda and move towards a more radical vision of penal abolition. By creating a dialogue between Boateng's documentaries and the analyses and frameworks of penal abolitionism, this paper calls for a remapping of global abolitionist discourse to include critiques of 'criminal justice' that are articulated in diverse geographical, cultural and rhetorical locations.

Keywords

Ghana; prison abolition; journalism; Seth Kwame Boateng.

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Introduction

In February 2015, Ghanaian broadcast journalist Seth Kwame Boateng, in partnership with Multimedia Group Limited (MGL), produced two documentary exposés about Ghana's prisons. *Locked and Forgotten* (2015) was shown on Joy News TV, featured on MyJoyOnline.com—one of the 'largest and most visited indigenous online platforms in Ghana' (MGL 2018: para. 6)—and is currently posted on YouTube with approximately 144,000 views as of this writing. In June of the following year, a sequel documentary, *Left to Rot* (2016), premiered at Accra's Law Court Complex. It was also shown on Joy News TV and MyJoyOnline, and currently has over 40,000 views online. Both documentaries focus on the plight of Ghana's remand prisoners: persons detained and/or imprisoned while awaiting trial. As highly successful examples of advocacy journalism (Fisher 2016), Boateng's documentaries both informed the public about life in Ghana's congested prisons and strengthened the hand of organisations and individuals calling for change. For example, after viewing *Locked and Forgotten*, Chief Justice Georgina Theodora Wood insisted that all Ghanaian judges and magistrates watch the documentary and visit their local prisons. Justice Wood also reanimated the Justice For All Programme, dispatching judges into prisons to expedite the hearings for remand detainees. Even Ghana's then-president, John Dramani Mahama, watched the film and subsequently became the first sitting president to tour the country's prisons. Calling a press conference from the grounds of Nsawam Medium Security Prison, President Mahama spoke of his duty to represent 'all Ghanaians, no matter where they are or in what circumstances they are' (Jubilee House Communications Bureau 2015).

In Ghana, public concern about long detentions and prison overcrowding is of long tenure. Article 19(1) of the 1992 *Constitution* of Ghana states that persons charged with a criminal offence shall be given a fair hearing within a reasonable time or be released. However, the practice of detention diverges from the letter of the law; the 14-day warrant stipulating that pre-trial detainees be brought to trial is easily renewed. Moreover, when case investigations stall, or the dockets and files for remand prisoners are misplaced, detainees may languish behind bars for extraordinary amounts of time, sometimes 'serv[ing] more time in detention awaiting trial, than the maximum possible sentence the law prescribes for their [alleged] offenses' (Owusu 2015: para. 2). Numerous factors contribute to this troubling status quo. Stringent laws pull Ghanaians into detention for petty violations; inefficient and overwhelmed police officers and court investigators are unable to usher cases through the courts; and judges have the discretion to confine many to jail because they do not have the resources to pay bail and sureties. (see Amnesty International 2012; Awiah 2017; Selby 2008; Wellington 2009). Boateng's documentaries are neither the first nor the last attempt to challenge this systemic brokenness (Ghana News Agency 2012; United States [US] Department of State 2018); however, they are unique because they do not only protest the narrow injustice of pre-trial detention but also draw the viewer into an encounter with the violence of Ghanaian prisons in toto.

Locked and Forgotten: The Plight of Remand Prisoners provides a human face to the prison-overcrowding crisis. The film's arresting visuals and narrative insight extends beyond the pre-trial detainees and describes the poor conditions facing all who are locked up in Ghana. In the film poverty and inefficiency coalesce to create conditions on the inside that violate basic standards of human dignity. The sequel, *Left to Rot*, then tells the story of what happens when prisoners are released and return to their communities. Together, these films expose how Ghanaian prisons are ubiquitously and routinely sites of atrocity.

Boateng's films have galvanised Ghanaian judges, politicians, prison officials, charities, churches and non-governmental organisations working to ameliorate the atrocious prison conditions (Boateng 2016; Boateng and Appiah 2016). Apart from the reformer cry to address human rights violations by enlarging the economic share of the prison sector (bigger prisons! new prisons! larger budget!) there is another policy prescription hidden within Boateng's challenging documentaries: penal abolition. This study argues that the narratives and images in *Locked and*

Forgotten and *Left to Rot* lend themselves to a movement that has yet to officially emerge on Ghanaian soil. I situate Boateng's prison documentaries within the realm of international penal abolitionism.

Penal abolitionism, as political theorist Gerlinda Smaus (quoted in Feest 2015: 143) explains, is the 'visible tip of a movement' that views prison and related punitive structures as 'the exclusion of human beings from civil rights and human rights', and struggles against this violence. As 'an approach, a perspective, a methodology, and most of all, a way of seeing' (Ruggiero 2010: 1), abolitionism is more than a limited set of demands; it promotes 'radical revisions to the social order' (Saleh-Hanna 2008: 417) by confronting the physical, social and moral violence done by 'criminal justice' systems around the world. Below, I explore the way abolitionist analysis and critique is present—albeit in unexpected registers and locations—in Boateng's documentaries. These films, together, evoke the horizon of penal abolitionism, even though they never invoke its name.

Positioning these documentaries in this way—not only within the existing prison reform movement, but also as a seed of a movement which has yet to be articulated on Ghanaian soil—is admittedly an act of radical reading. I attend to the ways these films challenge the rationality and morality of existing definitions of 'crime' within a complex Ghana, explore the violence and inhumanity of life behind bars, and reveal prison's enduring and irreversible consequences in Ghanaian families and communities. My analysis is rooted in both the silence and substance of these films. For example, there are moments in *Left to Rot* when the insufficiency of prison reform initiatives is evident; it appears in the resignation of those citizens who have been rescued from prison but find themselves still trapped in poverty. Likewise, I consider the way *Locked and Forgotten* displays the ethical floundering—the verbal ellipses, the grasping for rationalisations—of criminal justice advocates who would justify the levels of violence and injustice within Ghanaian prisons. Throughout, I imagine a penal abolitionist discourse that extends beyond the conventions of the social constructionism scholarship of the North American and European academe and includes other cultural and political sites where the violence of state punishment regimes is laid bare.

By creating a dialogue between Boateng's documentaries and the tenets of penal abolitionist scholarship, this paper suggests that we must attend to the variety of people launching critiques of the fundamental violence of modern incarceration, albeit in different registers, styles and locations. Aligned with 'southern criminology's' call to develop a transnational analytical gaze that attends to and disrupts the 'pyramid of global knowledge production' (Carrington, Hogg and Sozzo 2016: 2), this paper insists that Ghana's politics, history and cultural production create unique opportunities to both theorise and pursue abolition, and that these interventions are of both domestic and global significance.

That human rights violations occur within Ghanaian prisons is not a surprise; scholars and activists alike have described the atrocious conditions within cells and prison camps. Boateng's documentaries confirm United Nations Special Rapporteur Juan Mendez's (2014) assessment of Ghana's prisons as 'inhumane' places marked by 'squalid conditions, poor food, and overcrowding'. In *Locked and Forgotten* the camera lingers on the crumbling infrastructure of prisons from Sunyani to Tamale, and viewers bear witness to the poor food meted out to inmates and the inadequate water supply. The lens does not shy away from the physical suffering of prison, the skin diseases, rashes and claustrophobia. Boateng's narration reminds us of the stench of urine and faeces. At one point in the documentary, the journalist ushers viewers into an overcrowded sleeping cell that resembles nothing more than the blueprints of the slave ships that plied the Middle Passage. In the face of these dire conditions, there are those in Ghana and beyond who have dared to question whether the prison belongs on Ghanaian soil at all.

After all, the British penal system (on which Ghana's contemporary criminal justice apparatus is based) was largely illegitimate when it was introduced; it did not conform to the 'accepted norms, values and customs of the indigenous people of colonial Ghana' (Tankebe 2008: 73 in Akoensi 2016: 247). Robert B. Seidman's (1966: 89) assessment (first published in 1966) of Ghana's penal system 'as a monument to colonial rule, a memorial to confused goals, conflicting objectives, policies evolved and abandoned and sometimes no policies at all', persists within Ghanaian criminology scholarship (Appiahene-Gyamfi 1995: 321). Even Dr Kwame Nkrumah, anti-colonial icon and national state-builder, wrote publicly about the violence of imprisonment and questioned prison's utility in the new republic. 'Criminals, after all, are human beings', Nkrumah (quoted in Biney 2011: 42) mused: 'no man is born a criminal; society makes him so, and the only way to change things is to change the social conditions'. The combined weight of the prisons' colonial history and the sheer inhumanity of prison practice in Ghana create the conditions in which a Chief Justice of the Ghanaian courts, P.E.N.K. Archer, can openly 'admit' that the principles and objectives of Ghana's criminal code have failed, and suggest that it is time to pursue alternatives to incarceration (Appiahene-Gyamfi 1995: 2).

Relatively little has been said about the procession of voices that have articulated critiques of the fundamental violence and inutility of Ghanaian prisons or championed alternatives to the penal status quo. To be clear, I am not arguing that these scholars, politicians or journalists would necessarily identify themselves as abolitionists. However, this paper illuminates the presence of voices, past and present that disrupt the hegemony of incarceration on Ghana's soil by calling for a fundamental rethinking of the country's approach to social disorder and violence. Seth Kwame Boateng's recent documentaries must be situated within this broader tradition of Ghanaian penal scepticism embodied by criminologist Joseph Appiahene-Gyamfi's (1995: 10) hopeful musing that where punishment and prisons are concerned 'it may not be too late for Ghana to begin from the beginning'.

The global horizon of penal abolition

Penal abolition's 'insistent and insurgent argument to abandon "criminal justice" logic and practice' (Coyle and Schept 2017: 400) includes radical analysis, praxis and discourse aligned against the modern carceral state and its many social, cultural, economic and political formations. Poorly caricatured as a dogma focused on throwing open prison doors, penal abolitionism is better understood as an 'aspirational ethic and framework' (McLeod 2015: 1159) that pursues a more just social order by simultaneously destroying the violence of the carceral state and building alternative structures by which to pursue human flourishing and security. Beyond simply standing against prisons or criticising the conditions within, penal abolition requires that we 'revolutionize the way we perceive crime and punishment' (Ben-Moshe 2013: 86). It is, in the words of foundational abolitionist scholar Thomas Mathiesen (2008: 58), 'a stance ... the attitude of saying "no" '. This 'no' begins with rejecting the social and historical construction of the categories of 'crime' and 'criminals', and the associated perceptions, practices and institutions. In this paper, pursuing the horizon of abolition means attending to the diverse political and cultural sites where the contradictions of modern punishment regimes become untenable, and Mathiesen's 'no' becomes possible.

At the horizon, the problem of prison's violence mounts up like a tottering edifice, dwarfing the good intentions of those who propose to fix the problem without viewing its full dimensions or calling it by its true name. At the horizon, prison's violence is unveiled and reform is revealed as an improbable solution: a mirage that offers a modicum of psychological relief to the tender-hearted among us, not a resolution to the fundamental destructiveness of the carceral state. At the horizon, penal abolition shimmers into view when a single heart revolts at the brutality of the carceral state's order and crystallises into a lucid utterance: there must be another way. Pursuing this horizon is an opportunity to map the global contours of anti-penal thinking.

There is a burgeoning literature about the global dimensions of modern incarceration. However, scholarship pursuing modern abolitionism beyond Europe, North America and Australia has lagged behind. Abolitionist scholarship is created largely by scholars and activists working within the Global North, albeit within a radical tradition that insists that the persons most affected by carceral logic, those 'on the inside' and their families, are the most adept organisers, analysts and thinkers about the dilemmas of punishment and urgency of abolition. Understanding the carceral state's effort to create a divide between 'inside' and outside, and then crossing this border, is central to penal abolitionist logic and practice. Nevertheless, there are other geographic, linguistic and cultural borders that continue to constrain abolitionist thinking and organising.

Within penal abolitionist scholarship, the African continent appears, if at all, as another site from which to view the global dimensions of the prison industrial complex (Coyle 2008; Sudbury 2004a, 2004b).¹ The prison industrial complex—as theorised by leading prison justice scholars in the US including Angela Davis, Ruth Wilson Gilmore, Marie Gottschalk (2009) and Michelle Alexander—has transnational economic dimensions. The US' transformation into a hyper-carceral state is linked to the globalisation of capital and the resulting cascade of social ruptures. Prison privatisation's perverse economic imperative to shuttle more people into cages is by definition global; it is fuelled by 'multinational entit[ies]' whose footprint is increasingly outside the US (Sudbury 2004a: 14). Currently, prison builders are avidly pursuing new markets in the Global South by offering up privatisation as the solution for decrepit, substandard dungeons. The country of South Africa, where 'shiny new prisons [stand] alongside ... shantytowns and slums' (Sudbury 2004a: 14), is a symbol of the incarceration imperative that harnesses the hope of modern, efficient and humane prisons to a neoliberal mode of transnational corporate expansion. Prison reform scholars effectively describe how African countries are drawn into expanding webs of incarceration as they are further integrated into the international economic order (Mason 2013).

However, African countries are not just places afflicted by the global incarceration imperative; they may also be sites from which to chant it down. By establishing a dialogue between abolitionist analysis and the documentaries of Seth Kwame Boateng, this article looks to the horizon of a global penal abolitionism by suggesting that abolitionist critiques may precede or exist apart from abolitionist terminology. Recognising this offers a firmer foundation from which to build an agile solidarity between prison justice efforts around the world.

The presence and absence of an abolitionist political consciousness—how to build it, how to preserve it, how to identify it—has long troubled anti-prison scholars and activists. Some leading abolitionist scholars have confessed their lack of faith in the proximity of the new political and social order they seek. 'A "no" to prisons will not occur in our time', Mathiesen (2008: 58) declares, 'but as a stance it is viable and important'. Here, the desired abolitionist future exists primarily in the realm of imagination; it is a radical dream juxtaposition against a material reality riddled with the violence of state punishment. Following this framework, French Canadian criminologist and abolitionist Marie-Andrée Bertrand also questions the practicability of abolitionism. 'Abolitionism? The idea and the dream are there', Bertrand (quoted in Feest 2015: 144) writes: 'the policy is rather penal minimalism, pragmatism and human rightism'. 'Against this [carceral] society stands another imagined one', US criminologists Coyle and Schept (2017: 399–400) explain, 'which much like the slave-free society of antebellum America ... existed only in the imagination before the abolition of slavery was accomplished'. Nevertheless, these attempts to draw a clear line between a broken world and free imagination are altogether too neat; they neglect the ways that abolitionist work is happening all around us, even when it is not named as such.

After all, even in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century US South, a world without slavery was never confined to the realm of imagination. A tradition of marronage created by fugitive Africans and Native Americans in the swamps of Virginia, North Carolina and Florida; the rebellions of Nat

Turner and Denmark Vesey; and the rebelliousness of Haiti, in Gina Ulysse's words, the 'enfant terrible of the Americas' (Johnson, 2016)—all were sites of freedom that existed *alongside* and *within* the world of slavery (Diouf 2014). In the Atlantic world, for many enslaved persons freedom was not restricted to the realm of the radical imagination: it was memory, practice and tradition. Consequently, for many slaveholders, too, abolition was not an unlikely dream but a looming and frightening prophecy. Likewise, within the twenty-first century global penal order, there is a radical horizon—albeit incomplete and contingent—that can be seen even now. In relegating penal abolitionism to the realm of imagination, we risk obscuring the practices and sites where alternative visions of justice persist and erupt, even in the shadow of criminal justice logic. Pursuing *the horizon* is a call to attend to these locations where the bankruptcy of criminal justice logic is apparent and where alternative modes of justice may be culture, memory or everyday practice.

The injustice of criminal justice logic and the problem with reform

Locked and Forgotten and *Left to Rot* are sites where this horizon of abolition shimmers into view. These films begin with Boateng's decision to walk through the doors of Nsawam Medium Security Prison, Tamale Central Prison and Sunyani Central Prison, and allow those who are on the inside to have their say. By positioning those confined as both human beings and citizens, and giving them the microphone, Boateng undermines the first premise of 'criminal justice logic': the creation of the criminal as a separate and denigrated status. Although the language of abolition is never explicitly used, the films transgress many of the borders erected by the penal order, including this first barrier between the inside and the outside.

In Boateng's films, facile narratives of prisoners as 'criminals', prison structures as sites of rehabilitation and courts as places of justice begin to break down. The documentaries reject existing categories of 'crime' and 'criminality'—they demonstrate Mathiesen's 'no'—by displaying the irrationality of marking impoverished, mentally ill, unlucky or idle Ghanaian citizens as criminals and sweeping them into jail. In *Locked and Forgotten*, Ghanaian Interior Minister Mark Woyongo asks:

why [should] someone who has stolen a bunch of plantain or some tubers of yam obviously to feed ... be incarcerated for long periods, during which time the government is expected to feed, clothe, accommodate and ensure the health or general welfare of such a person? (MyJoyOnline TV 2015: mins. 41–42)

The question raised here (and by a government representative minister, no less) communicates the moral unease that accompanies a state punishment regime that criminalises poverty and prosecutes a host of transgressions, many of which are glaringly rational. Abolitionist scholar Michael J. Coyle (2016) has convincingly argued that narratives of 'crime' and 'criminality' serve to hide the ubiquity of human transgression across society by seeking to classify and isolate particular bodies, actions and transgressions as worthy of sanction. In a Ghana of stark and widening economic disparity, contemplating the 'crimes' for which persons are losing their liberty initiates a type of ethical crisis. In 2015, petty theft was the transgression that sent the greatest number of Ghanaians into cells. Approximately 80 per cent of persons imprisoned during that year were accused of nonviolent offenses including theft, robbery, possession of stolen property, drug possession, causing damage to property, fraud, contempt of court, conspiracy, unlawful entry, accepting bribes, driving violations, escaping from custody and illegal mining (Ghana Prisons Service 2015). This is a country, after all, where the Executive Secretary of the government's Narcotics Control Board openly expresses outrage at the draconian prison sentences meted out by the courts for petty drug offences. He states it is 'unacceptable' that the prisons are full of 'poor and vulnerable' people while 'the real perpetrators of crime are those entrusted with the responsibility of seeing to the welfare of the poor, vulnerable and underprivileged' (GhanaWeb 2016: para. 4).

Seth Kwame Boateng's documentaries amplify the voices of those within Ghana—some at the highest levels of the government—who express discomfort with the cornerstone of the 'criminal justice' system: the fundamental sorting of citizens into 'criminals'. Moreover, the documentaries do not conform to the 'idealized account' of 'justice institutions' as instruments that effectively address human transgression and preserve public safety (Coyle and Schept 2017: 400). At the centre of penal abolitionist analysis is the tearing down of the justificatory narratives of criminal justice logic. Abolitionism 'hold[s] "criminal justice" logic accountable for its [own] utopias' by showing that there are a number of empirically unproven (and arguably naïve) assertions—such as the social rehabilitatory function of the cage—that are at the basis of modern 'criminal justice' systems (Coyle and Schept 2017: 400). In Boateng's documentaries, Ghana's criminal justice institutions appear to compound rather than remedy the violence and suffering in Ghanaian life. By allowing those who are locked up to speak for themselves about arbitrary, draconian and opaque police and court practices, these films delineate the fundamental flaws of the existing criminal justice order. However, *Locked and Forgotten* also shows the dystopia of Ghana's criminal justice by challenging the representatives of this system—the judges, the police, the prison services and the government—to defend the status quo. In featured interviews, many of the key stakeholders themselves wrestle with the failures of the national criminal justice system and plunge viewers into foundational debates about the defensibility and ethics of Ghana's criminal justice order. What is the distinction between 'criminal', 'citizen' and 'human being', and are the same rights afforded to all? Is there any social benefit to imprisonment?

In *Locked and Forgotten*, Assistant Commissioner of Police (ACP) and Director-General of Legal Services for the Ghana Police Department Frank Kwofie faces questions about the role of police inefficiency when remand prisoners are held for shocking amounts of time, some as long as five, eight or even 11 years without trial. ACP Kwofie's response deflects the question of police accountability by seeking to describe prisoners as untrustworthy narrators:

Some of the inmates who were going to court on [a] regular basis ... were telling the people who were interviewing them that they had never been to court for five, 10 years. Just because they want to hide under the ambit of the Justice For All Programme and get released unbailed. So sometimes ... some of the inmates don't tell those who go there the real facts of their own stories. (MyJoyOnline TV 2015: mins. 17–18)

Despite Kwofie's contention that 'inmates' may exaggerate their plight to access a reformist program, this is a problem that is well-documented by citizen journalists and human rights organisations (Amnesty International 2012; Selby 2008; Wellington 2009). In other words, anecdotal reports of detainee malingering do not justify the problem of notoriously lengthy prison stays or inefficient police. Moreover, in attempting to cast doubt on the veracity of prisoner testimonies, Kwofie deploys a common tactic within the modern law and order apparatus: the depiction of the prisoner as a class apart, necessarily dishonest and morally corrupt (Dako-Gyeke and Baffour 2016).

Attempts to justify the injustice of Ghana's existing criminal justice system are again in evidence during *Locked and Forgotten*'s featured interview with retired Justice Stephen Brobbey, who also reaches for narratives of danger and risk when asked to justify the draconian fines and sentences that lead to Ghana's overcrowded prisons:

You don't blame the judges ... If there is a man who has just come from prison, he was last year in prison, the year before in prison ... the police know him very well, the police say this man has just been released from prison ... the court may be reluctant to grant him bail, knowing very well what he is going to do. (MyJoyOnline TV 2015: mins. 15–16)

In this formulation, judges must be presumed infallible because they are privy to specialised knowledge; that is, they 'know [the criminal] very well'. Where the uninformed public might see court misconduct or excessive sentencing, Brobbey insists that judges and the police are the ones who 'know' better the nature of the 'criminal', and, thus, can make the correct assessment. Moreover, Brobbey relies on a vision of Ghana as fundamentally divided between 'criminals' and 'citizens' and insists that the courts, police and prisons should be revered as institutions that stand between the dangerous 'criminal' and those Ghanaians who would want to live in peace:

Above all, remember the 24 or 25 million people of this country, most of us are peace loving, law abiding and we need to be protected against these miscreants and criminals marauding the streets and giving people no peace. They need the protection and the protection lies in putting undesirable elements in prison. (MyJoyOnline TV 2015: min. 49.06, emphasis added)

Along with affirming this boundary between prisoner and citizen as a way to deflect the articulated criticisms of a woefully broken 'criminal justice' system, retired justice Brobbey also insists that in the context of Ghana's limited resources, public review and criticism of 'criminal justice' is misguided:

But again, you've got to look at our circumstances. We can't get enough money for health, education ... How much do you spend on people who brought their own misfortune onto themselves? Leave it to the government. (MyJoyOnline TV 2015: min. 38.15)

Although the budgetary constraints of the Ghanaian government are undeniable, the idea that the public should simply trust the government's oversight over vulnerable populations or that persons have relinquished their right to humane care because of their actions flies in the face of the Ghana Prisons Service's own code of ethics, let alone global standards of human rights. By placing these expert interviews from judges and police into a dialogue with the testimonies of imprisoned persons and their families, Boateng's documentaries invite viewers into a long overdue conversation about the humanity of prisoners and the humaneness of the state.

Along with challenging the prevalent narrative of prisoners as sources of risk, and the courts and prisons as sites of fairness, Boateng's documentaries also make it clear that prison reform efforts may be unequal to the task of mitigating the social and economic violence unleashed by Ghana's 'criminal justice' status quo. To be sure, Boateng's films have been embraced by a host of reform-minded individuals and organisations seeking to ameliorate the conditions in Ghanaian prisons. Along with Chief Justice Georgina Wood's insistence that this film be required viewing for those who would arbitrate the freedom or captivity of citizens and support for the expansion of the Justice For All Programme (which brings judges into the jails to process detainees on the spot), the Ghana Prisons Service Council launched Project Efiase, a fundraising initiative to tap into corporate and private philanthropy to rehabilitate the country's resource-strapped prisons. Without disparaging these worthy initiatives, Boateng's documentaries, particularly *Left to Rot*, describe violence of a scope and size that these programs of prison reform are poorly equipped to rectify.

Attending to the tension between agendas of reform and abolition continues to be central to the scholarship and praxis of penal abolition (de Haan 1990; Mathieson 1974; Sudbury 2009). The example of the late twentieth-century US, where decades of prison reform have ultimately fuelled mass incarceration, has shown the importance of championing 'non-reformist reforms' (sometimes called negative reform)—those 'measures that reduce the power of an oppressive system while illuminating the system's inability to solve the rises it creates' (Berger, Kaba and Stein 2017: para. 3). Making this distinction—that is, delineating between reforms that will ultimately increase the power of the carceral state's web of control and those that will increase

the power, health, safety and opportunity of persons behind bars without justifying or shoring up prison violence—is central to the challenge of penal abolitionism (Ben-Moshe 2013). In *Left to Rot*, by following the story of persons who have ostensibly been rescued from injustice by the Justice For All Programme, the film forces viewers to reckon with the insufficiency of reform initiatives that seek to 'improve' courts, prisons and police without confronting the fundamental violence unleashed by these institutions. In Boateng's sequel, the liberation from cells is a limited freedom, contingent and incomplete. The shadow of the carceral state continues to hang over the affected individuals, families and communities, even after the cell door has been thrown open.

For Halidu Bukari, leaving the Tamale Central Prison at the behest of the Justice For All Programme was not an exit from prison's violence. Bukari's joyful return to his 92-year-old father is painfully incomplete; eight lost years of detention cannot be easily washed away. The elder Mr Bukari's interview dwells on the anxiety of the past years when he was alone. Who would take care of him if he fell ill? Would he die without seeing his son free again? In the documentary, he has not been able to move past the trauma of the past decade (MyJoyOnline TV 2016: min. 10) Moreover the detention has settled into the family's economic condition, imposing new hardships where previously there was opportunity. The elder Mr Bukari sold off small tracts of land to raise travel fare so he could be in Tamale whenever his son's case was scheduled to be heard in the courts. However, supporting his son in this way proved to be more difficult than imagined. The case was adjourned many times over and the elder Mr Bukari would fund a trip to Tamale only to discover that his son's case was postponed. When Halidu Bukari finally arrives home, the family holds only one small acre of land and a bare hut. Returning to this economic condition has not been easy.

The joy of a miraculous release has been tempered with suffering. When Boateng comes to visit the now free man, Bukari shows him the dark, single room where his father stayed alone; his mother and stepmother passed away while he was behind bars and his wife and children left the village and moved on (MyJoyOnline TV 2016: min. 9.40). Halidu himself looks different, Boateng intones, '[life] outside the prison has been worse for him'. Work is not easy to find; he has injured himself cutting maize and is unable to secure proper health care. He describes a disorientation that has solidified into a deep depression:

BUKARI: Since I came and I didn't know where I live, and I have nothing ... and I don't know how to do ... So that's where I begin to confuse, and I didn't know how to handle myself again. I can't handle my situation. So sometimes I think something evil but by the grace of God, I still pray God that God should grant me grace.

BOATENG: So at times you feel temptations, like what? Evil, like what?

BUKARI: Temptation ... the time I came, true true, sometime it makes me, like, even ... if I die self, it better path might be in the world. But by the grace of God, I try to manage it so I will not follow what my mind is telling me.

Now I have nothing. I don't have anything. Even the sleeping place. Sometime the food I will chop will be a problem. (MyJoyOnline TV 2016: mins. 11–12)

The poor 'reintegration' that Halidu Bukari eloquently describes echoes criminologist Pat Carlen's critique of standard 'criminal justice' practices of rehabilitation and release, where people are 'returned to the poverty-stricken assemblage of multiple economic deprivations, cultural marginalizations and exclusions from citizen rights from whence they came' (Carlton and Segrave 2013: xiii). As Halidu Bukari describes his depression, the thoughts of self-harm and hopelessness that continue to trouble him, his story echoes the testimony of countless other former prisoners, scholars and activists who publicly insist that caging people shatters the human spirit profoundly, and sometimes irreparably (Haney et al. 2013; Travis and Waul 2003). Across

the Atlantic Ocean from the Bukari family in New York City, the suicide of Kalief Browder (1993–2015)—a pre-trial detainee who spent three years incarcerated in New York City's Rikers Island without ever being convicted of a 'crime'—galvanised a movement to shut down this notorious jail (see Marton 2018; Reese 2018).

Accounting for the enduring social, psychological and economic losses created by imprisonment is central to Seth Kwame Boateng's documentaries. Both *Locked and Forgotten* and *Left to Rot* focus on the broken relationships—the web of children left without school fees and elderly people left without support—that surround Ghana's overcrowded prisons. In these documentaries, prison divides mothers from children and creates unstable social conditions for vulnerable children and elderly relatives. When Seth Kwame Boateng visits the former remand prisoner Yaa Faustina months after her release, her joy is unparalleled. After almost a decade behind bars at Tamale Central Prison, restoration is at hand. Faustina spontaneously breaks into songs of thanksgiving; the Lord has surely been merciful to her. However, as the documentary's camera pans across the solemn faces of her children, Boateng notes that these are the ones who pay the highest price. The drawn face of Gifty Atambiri, one of Faustina's oldest daughters, as she describes the emotional and financial turmoil of her mother's absence is a confirmation. The younger children have dropped out of school and have been unable to return and she, the elder daughter, has had to carry the burden (MyJoyOnline TV 2016: min. 5.41).

Fathers and husbands also lament prison's destruction of their families. For Akwasi Derry, who spent more than eight years in Sunyani Central Prison, the loss of his children's education and the fact that they have become labourers like him has created bitterness (MyJoyOnline TV 2016: min. 3.48). When Abdulai Mohamadu is released through Justice For All after a decade in Koforidua Prison, he insists that he will go straight home to Benin to see the children he has been missing for 10 years. His wife, he tells Boateng, is already gone and remarried (MyJoyOnline TV 2016: min. 21.06). With tears flowing down his face, Kwabena Donkor, the longest serving remand prisoner at Kumasi Central Prison, expresses his sadness that he might never again see his elderly mother before she passes away (MyJoyOnline TV 2016: min. 35.32). Although the Justice For All Programme is the reformist solution to the problems described in *Locked and Forgotten*, the sequel documentary shows that more is required. There is no recourse for the families and communities affected by prison's violence; that which has been broken in the individual psyche, family life and community cannot so readily be made whole.

Abolitionist horizons

Throughout this paper I have described how Seth Kwame Boateng's documentaries echo, engage and expand some of the most important frameworks within penal abolitionist analyses. From highlighting the inadequacy of reform, to exposing the way 'criminal justice' stakeholders weaponise stigma to elide public criticism, these films offer a robust interrogation of the violence of Ghanaian prisons. Without ever uttering the word abolition, these two documentaries invite their audiences to acknowledge the reprehensibility of Ghana's 'criminal' justice status quo. These remarkable documentaries even include moments when Ghanaian interviewees seem to gaze openly towards penal abolition and call for another way.

For example, *Locked and Forgotten* features an interview with the Director-General of the Ghana Prisons Service, Matilda Baffour-Arthur, who assesses the conditions and costs of Ghana's prisons in strikingly different language than the police chief and the retired judge. As the official with the most direct and constant contact with prisons and prisoners, Baffour-Arthur directly rejects the narrative of dangerous, untrustworthy prisoners who are a class apart. 'I want to say something', she interjects during her interview:

it is not everyone who is in prison today who has actually offended. Some of them were victims of circumstances and they were not able to put their cases across

well. They didn't have lawyers ... or they may even be illiterate; they may not even understand the proceedings going on. But people like us may have trouble and go for the best lawyers and ... go out scot-free. (MyJoyOnline TV 2015: min. 53.18)

Baffour-Awuah's insight invites a radical analysis of human behaviour in Ghana. Transgression is not limited to those who end up behind bars. 'People like us' who may 'have trouble' can go for the best lawyers and go 'scot-free', while others—the 'victims of circumstances' who may be illiterate, financially constrained or disadvantaged in their ability to interact with state power—become marked as 'criminals' and pay the price. Her perspective echoes penal abolitionism's insight that the bad prisoner/good society dichotomy swiftly crumbles when we acknowledge the social conditions that shape practices of incarceration.

Director-General Baffour-Awuah also bears witness to the raw violence of state punishment:

Prison is a very harsh and deprived place. When you are in prison you can face a lot of emotional and mental agony ... that alone can make you mad ... [Prisoners] may be going through some mental torture. Simply leaving your family behind and being in a different environment where there is so much hardship can blow your mind, you understand? (MyJoyOnline TV 2015: mins. 10–11)

The pretence that Ghanaian prisons are sites of rehabilitation melts away in the face of the Director-General's assessment that preserving sanity and peace in such dire conditions is itself a gargantuan task. By bearing witness to the conditions on the inside and recognising the humanity and common citizenship of those who end up there, Baffour-Awuah calls into question the infallibility of Ghana's 'criminal justice' practice.

It is not insignificant that in Boateng's documentaries the director of the national prison system articulates a damning analysis of incarceration. These films suggest that there are unique opportunities for solidarity arising from the shared interests of prison guards and imprisoned persons in Ghana. The saying is that prison officers die young, Mrs Baffour-Awuah explains (MyJoyOnline TV 2015: min. 35.14). The dire conditions of Ghanaian prisons—particularly the biomedical threats—cannot be contained to the body of prisoners; that is, communicable diseases can and do infiltrate the bodies and homes of the prison guards too. Proximity to these cages—even for those charged with maintaining and upholding their existence—carries with it serious risks. Accordingly, the Ghana Prisons Service has been seeking to recruit at least one medical doctor into its ranks. Guards and prisoners alike also stand together in seeking an increase from the government on the daily food allowance (GHC1.80/day) for incarcerated persons. Here, too, the costs of torture exact such a high price that there is common cause between those who are subject to these terms and those who must enforce them. To be sure, the interests of prison guards and those on the inside are not always aligned; there is a significant global literature about prison guards who function as architects and bulwarks of prison violence (Bell et al. 1999). Yet, this film plants a different seed: in the Ghanaian context, confronting prison violence may also include building coalitions with prison guards, officers and staff. The bold critiques offered by the Director-General of prisons disrupt a monolithic presentation of the 'state' as villain or culprit in global carceral politics. This disruption is useful, both analytically and politically, for abolitionist analysis. Seeking to blame a singular agent (i.e., 'the state') for penal violence, as Gilmore, Richie and Coles (2018) suggest in reference to the US, oversimplifies the ways racial capitalism provides the foundation for a hydra-headed carceral politics. Moreover, pursuing this singular culprit, as Boateng's interview with Baffour reveals, may close our eyes to the particular factions within the 'state', who, given the proper conditions, may also be well-placed to challenge the blight of incarceration.

Perhaps the clearest glimpse of this abolitionist horizon is found in *Left to Rot* when a Ghanaian judge, Justice Asmah Akwasi Asiedu, is interviewed after his tour of Nsawam Prison. He is visibly

shaken: 'I feel devastated by the horrible things I saw in the cells', he notes. Then, Asiedu, a high court judge, openly admits that if he had known better the conditions within prisons he would not have sent persons awaiting trial to remand custody. Asked whether he would have knowingly referred people to such conditions, Justice Asiedu hesitates and replies with a simple 'no' (MyJoyOnline TV 2016: min. 16.10). This moment echoes Mathiesen's poignant description of abolitionism as beginning first with willingness, an attitude of saying 'no'. Justice Asiedu's moment of disavowal—preserved and publicised in Seth Kwame Boateng's film—highlights this horizon, this moment when another world is possible.

Conclusion

This paper has suggested that we look beyond the Global North, even beyond the particular language of North American abolitionist movements, to pursue the ways in which communities around the world are rejecting carceral logic. This is a geographic expansion with pragmatic consequences; pursuing a more global penal abolitionism requires new interest in the spaces where communities are thinking, dreaming and speaking beyond 'criminal justice' logic. By exploring the ways Seth Kwame Boateng's documentaries illuminate the insufficiency of existing prison reform initiatives and challenge the ethical premises of the 'criminal justice' status quo, this paper looks to the horizon of penal abolition from Ghanaian shores. Directing our gaze in this direction is not a prediction that prisons in Ghana are inevitably moribund or that this mode of state violence will automatically lose its political stronghold. After all, the global abolitionist scholarship offers a cautionary note about the adaptability and resilience of penal culture in the twenty-first century; the economic, political and cultural investments in penalty are not easily shaken (Cunneen et al. 2013). Nevertheless, by situating Boateng's recent documentaries within a longer tradition of Ghanaian scepticism about the punishment status quo, this paper shows the importance of attending to the diverse geographies, locations and languages in which the work of modern abolition may take root and flourish.

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¹ An important exception is Viviane Saleh-Hanna's (2008) path-breaking study of incarceration in Nigeria.

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