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Distinguished Historical Geography Lecture: Carceral Space and the Usable Past

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DISTINGUISHED HISTORICAL GEOGRAPHY LECTURE, 2013

Carceral Space and the Usable Past

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This paper is based on the Distinguished Historical Geography lecture delivered at the 2013 meeting of the Association of American Geographers in Los Angeles, California.

Introduction

I am among a second generation of American feminist historical geographers. My advisor Jeanne Kay Guelke was a pioneer in the field, offering in the 1980s and 1990s some of the most incisive critiques of the masculinism of American historical geography.¹ I was lucky to become her student while she also served as chair of the Geography Department at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln in the early 1990s; I think she was probably one of the first women to serve as such in the country.

There are not many of us who would – then or now – self-identify as “feminist historical geographers,” though of course our work overlaps with that of scholars in many closely aligned fields such as critical historical geography, postcolonial studies, and feminist history and historiography. Nonetheless, it is important to pause and consider what the early feminist historical geographers and historians accomplished for us and for geography. Thanks to predecessors such as Jeanne, we can now take for granted altered notions about what events, places, processes, and especially people count in and for historical geography. They demanded new ways of thinking about traditional areas of historical geography research (e.g. settlement patterns, staple export production, and types of survey systems), and offered whole new scales and categories of study such as the home, domestic space, and social reproduction to do so.

Of course what’s “in” and what’s “out” is always in flux. Thus one of the few areas where feminist historical geography aligned with critical race studies, for instance, was in colonial and postcolonial geographies.² These, however, are now susceptible to drifting into the background, and places of colonial contact with them. We do not want to lose that foothold, though, and one way to keep race relations deeply in the mix is through historical carceral geographies, the subject of this paper.

I recently became interested in critical prison studies as an activist – as a volunteer and now decade-long executive board member of a local nonprofit prisoner rights group called the Lewisburg Prison Project or LPP. The project’s focus is on conditions of confinement; that is, helping to protect the civil and human rights of inmates incarcerated in the 50+ prisons located in the Pennsylvania Middle (judicial) District. Where I live in Pennsylvania unfortunately has one of the highest concentrations of correctional facilities anywhere in the United States. Prisons are the second largest industry in Pennsylvania overall, and the state’s incarceration rate continues to outpace all the other US states.³ Recently, inspired by my association with LLP, my work has become more scholarly-activist in nature. I am presently working on a number of projects related to historical geographies of mass incarceration in the US and the “spatial violence” of late modern

American prisons and jails.⁴ This includes a study of USP-Lewisburg, a federal penitentiary located in my town, which has unfortunately become the focus of much of LPP's current work and to which I will return below.

When I began research in this area I was surprised by the sheer volume of work available on American prisons and jails, across many disciplines—sociology, criminal justice, political science, psychology, history, law, and architecture—with relatively little contribution by geographers, though there are some key exceptions.⁵ There are many, many books about prisons in our university library, and yet what strikes me most about them is how relatively little impact all this academic work over the last forty years seems to have had on stemming the tide of hyper-incarceration levels. There is an explanation for this. As Wacquant has argued, prisons have grown increasingly closed and secretive and this has led to a reduction in direct observation types of studies in favor of those focusing more on “distant” analysis of incarceration rates, the dynamics of cost-effectiveness of penal management, and sentencing and litigation, among others.⁶ I think this also should alert us of the need to understand the connections between scholarly works and activist networks. We do not want carceral geography to become a sub-discipline stuck in the Ivory Tower. So with an aim to keep at least one foot planted in the real world of incarcerated individuals, my recent objective has been to help uncover—or rather to construct—what we might define as a usable historical geography of the American carceral past.

Here I focus only on historical geographies of American correctional institutions and their staggering growth, not on the much broader field of “the carceral” which would include concentration campus, immigration detention centers, Black Sites, and so on. Moreover my focus on the US is not meant to be chauvinistic about American historical geography, but is instead an admission that we have, in the US, a bigger problem than anywhere else in the world. We have all heard the numbers: the US has 5% of the world's population but 25% of its prisoners, with an estimated 2.4 million men and women behind bars. This is the highest rate of incarceration of anywhere in the world, and the highest rate in US history. As many have argued, the US penal system is also a racialized strategy for regulating the urban poor; 70% of the prison population is African American or Latino. African Americans make up 13% of the US population, but 50% of the prison population; and two-thirds of African American men in their twenties are incarcerated or on parole or probation.⁷

Philo has defined “carceral geography” as a subset of security geographies, with “carceral spaces” defined as those “set aside for ‘securing’ - detaining, locking up/away - problematic populations of one kind or another.”⁸ However, this definition does not really capture the complexity of how “the carceral” figures deeply in many social, economic, and political systems, both historically and today. This is evident in much of Philo's own scholarship on spaces of confinement.⁹ Moran defines carceral geography as a field of geographical research that focuses on practices of incarceration, viewing “carceral space” broadly as a type of institution whose functionings have been understood primarily in dialogue with the works of Michael Foucault, Erving Goffman, and Giorgio Agamben. To this definition I would add that carceral geography studies share a distinctly activist component, an imperative to contribute to positive social change.¹⁰

As Moran notes, whereas scholars from other disciplines have tended to focus on *time* as the basic structuring dimension of prison life (“doing time,” etc.), geographers are particularly well positioned to foreground the experience and study of prison *space* (or time-space) in three ways: (1) in study of the nature of the spaces of incarceration, individuals' experiences within them, and their regulatory regimes and systems of punishment; (2) in study of the locational or distributional geographies of carceral systems, particularly with respect to their impact on

community economic development; and (3) in study of the relationship between the carceral and an increasingly punitive security state.¹¹

In this essay I suggest ways that historical geography can inform, and be informed by, these three areas of carceral geography. To date, those who self-identify as historical geographers have primarily contributed to the first; and these, to do with penal institutions but also the carceral more broadly conceived, to include workhouses, reformatories, and asylums. They have contributed to study of the interior design and architecture of prisons; the uses, nature, and experience of spaces of confinement; and the myriad social practices and tactics used to control people and their movements, especially through grand epical shifts. Most have, in one way or another, engaged with Foucault's ideas from *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1977), particularly his critique of Bentham's panopticon design, surveillance power, and the production of docile bodies.¹²

However, there are many other important studies that use historical geography logics. I will name just one: Gilmore's foundational *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* (2007), which examines the development of California's carceral landscape from the nineteenth century to today. In *Golden Gulag*, Gilmore describes how punishment became industrialized throughout California. What she terms the "prison fix" was a partially geographical solution to an unfolding political economic crisis in the state—the solution to surplus land, capital, labor, and state capacity "congealed" into the prison industrial complex. California prisons were built in areas that historically derived their power from agriculture and resource extraction, and the bodies that filled them were the former low-wage workers from urban centers such as Los Angeles.¹³

Without becoming overly or unnecessarily schematic, I would like to offer some suggestions on how we can integrate the above themes into what we might call a "usable carceral past." What is a useful or usable past that could help both understand current carceral trends, and ameliorate them? I would argue that we must have at our disposal a usable carceral past in order to be able to confront the unmitigated propaganda about people incarcerated in American prisons and jails that confronts us daily, and continue the project of progressive social transformation.

Segue: Prague's carceral historical geography

I was fortunate to be able to attend the 2012 International Conference of Historical Geographers last summer in the beautiful city of Prague, Czech Republic. Inside the conference was a fabulous array of sessions, receptions, and activities; however, it was outside the conference, as I wandered the streets of Prague, where historical geography really made an impact on me. This city of charming castles and bridges, historic neighborhoods and squares, incredible museums, and cutting-edge art and architecture also offers one of the most usable examples of a carceral past I have encountered: from the smallest historical markers commemorating anti-Communist dissidents, to the Jewish ghetto and Nazi concentration camp at nearby Terezin. On one of my walks I stumbled upon the brilliant Franz Kafka Museum, memorial to one of the city's famous writers. Beyond the biographical details of Kafka's life—including the story of his sisters' deaths at Auschwitz—the museum features exhibits that bring to life his various novels and works, each in separate rooms.

The room devoted to *In the Penal Colony* features a model of the torture machine described in Kafka's story, which slowly executed the condemned by inscribing the name of his crime onto his body. "Guilt is never to be doubted," Kafka wrote.¹⁴ The engraved wall plaque accompanying the model informs the museum visitor of Foucault's analysis of modern punishment described in *Discipline and Punish* (1977). What happened with the executioners and their machine "was the start of modern justice" it reads, "when punishment became a merely administrative act,

versus the more spectacular public punishment that characterized the pre-modern form." The description continues:

What the Kafka narrative anticipates is the paradoxical extension and naturalization of the process. Justice distances itself from the punishment it metes out by situating the execution in an autonomous space but at the same time the prison form expressed throughout the social body establishes mechanisms of surveillance and control at the very heart of the modern city.

This display, to me, is an exceptionally usable reconstruction of an important moment in carceral (as well as literary) history. It is strident, educational, and unapologetically dark—both figuratively and literally; in fact the entire museum is dimly lit as if to capture a foreboding sense of a past that had very little pleasant to illuminate. I wondered what might be some usable parallels in the American carceral past? How might we distinguish a “usable past” here in the US from which we can learn?

In search of a usable past

In my view there is no point in studying the past unless there is something we can learn from it. The past must be made relevant, have purpose, and make a difference. Constructing a “usable” past thus implies taking a pragmatic approach to history and historical geography, what Tosh helpfully describes as “critical applied history.”¹⁵ But of course a usable past begs the questions: usable by whom, and for what end or purpose?—both of which, I think, historical geographers are well equipped to address head-on.

The library search term “usable past” is most often associated with the heyday of social history in the 1970s and 1980s, as a response and challenge to top-down, master narratives and foundational myths about the American experience. By turns scholars have argued that the “real” American story is that of slavery, of Native American genocide, of various immigrant groups struggling under labor subjugation, among others.¹⁶ The term was originally coined by the literary critic Van Wyck Brooks, who in 1918 asked, “What, out of all the multifarious achievements and impulses and desires of the American literary mind, ought we *elect* to remember?”¹⁷ Many progressive era intellectuals like Brooks sought to “mobilize American memory as a resource for a more democratic future,” to somehow construct a usable past from the many contradictions inherent in the American experience. A usable past is thus “an invention or at least a retrospective reconstruction [of historical referents] to serve the needs of the present.”¹⁸ It is, then, an acknowledgment that behind every version of the past there must be a set of interests in the present.

Vigorous debates have ensued in the last three decades among historians about the instrumentalism, serviceability, and presentism inherent in attempts to create a usable past; and these, from wildly divergent ideological and methodological positions. While it would seem that research into the past could never be anything *but* presentist, many still hold to the idea that the past is somehow uncritically knowable and accessible ‘on its own terms’; or alternatively, that presentist accounts that are instrumentally constructed or invented can be put to deliberately falsifying, distorting, or manipulative purposes.¹⁹ Obviously there are degrees of contextualization, as well as unethical scholarly motives. But it also seems that scholars today should be better aware of these dynamics, more prepared to be candid about the presentism of their accounts, their ethics, and their value judgments. Clearly we have by now learned, if nothing else, that we *produce* histories (and historical geographies) rather than reflect some pre-existing condition of the past as a coherent, mutually agreed upon body of knowledge.²⁰

Questions of reflexivity, positionality, and accountability give us scope to acknowledge that there are different ways to explore the importance of past places, and the importance of the past in place, as Shein argues, and thus “free us to an extent from the dangers of presentism.”²¹ Again though, historical geographers have long discussed these issues—we have heard this before. And yet, the project of exposing these undercurrents remains profoundly unfinished.

Moreover, historical interpretations are always going to be contingent, since there are always many experiences and perspectives—“multiple pasts”—happening on the ground simultaneously. Questions regarding the availability of historical sources; archival reason; and archives as sites of power, privilege, and repression remain, along with the psychic or psychoanalytic costs of remembering and forgetting traumatic events (at the individual, familial, and social scales). These are all important and complicated questions and issues that we would do well to keep on the front burner.²²

Recently I came across a study that polled Americans about how they actually think and talk about their past—as individuals and as citizens. In this study, historians Rosenzweig and Thelen found that Americans in general “pursue the past actively and make it part of everyday life,” through a whole host of activities such as compiling photographic albums and visiting history museums.²³ However, their real insight was in the distinct differences they found between (“white”) European American respondents and African American and Native American ones. White people chose to remember a personal history that was small scale and intimate. They largely ignored national narratives when talking about events and people that shaped their own lives—typically it was a family member from the past who most influenced and affected them. The authors argued that whites not only did not connect their family histories as part of a larger community or nation, but also were more ignorant of how their family histories connected with larger stories.

By contrast, the Native American and African American respondents in the study identified their histories as both personal and also more civic and public; they were far more ready than European Americans to place their personal pasts in a collective narrative explicitly tied to the American national story. The authors interviewed two hundred Oglala Sioux living on the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota, for instance. The chronology, key turning points, sites, and historical figures that the Oglala people identified as important went against the narrative structure and content of conventional American history.²⁴ The details are probably obvious and do not need rehearsing here, but the salient point is how deeply embedded the past is in their present: “the past becomes their everyday life.” The respondents talked passionately about things that happened over a century ago.²⁵ If we can slough over the complicated—and not very well addressed—identity politics inherent in the study just a bit, we might conclude that the past constructed by the respondents is not only “usable,” but essential to group and individual survival.

Again ignoring the largely unaddressed identity politics of the study, Rosenzweig and Thelen found as well that to African Americans they interviewed, family history is the same as the history of their race. Though the authors were reluctant to distinguish a unified African American narrative, their respondents all identified the same set of historical events, figures, commemorations, sites, and even sources as important to that history. These set them apart but also within the conventional American narrative of emancipation and progress, including in all its failures: slavery, sharecropping, Jim Crow, Civil Rights, and Martin Luther King’s assassination. The sites of pilgrimage commemorating these events constituted African American ‘history on the landscape.’ When asked to name someone in history who most affected him or her personally, about half of the respondents chose MLK (with Jesus Christ second). The authors conclude that African Americans have a stronger sense of the public past than do European Americans, and

that they readily engaged notions of democracy and progress that the European Americans eschewed.²⁶ Thus, African Americans are the “primary keepers and interpreters of American civic memory,” a civic memory that as another critic describes it, “is the most usable past we have got.”²⁷

Despite its blank spots, I find this research instructive. What materially constituted the usable past to the respondents included, in each case, three elements: (1) the past in particular events; (2) the past as embodied in particular people; and (3) the past as memory materialized on the landscape. One method of constructing a usable carceral past then would be to put these same elements in play: what events, people, and material landscapes stand out in incarceration’s history?

My sense is that two of these three elements—the important events and people of the past—are already well integrated into critical prison research and scholarship; in fact these are well-trodden territory. Most critical research on American prisons attempts to understand them by first of all highlighting key historical *events* such as: trends in criminal justice structures, sentencing laws, and the courts; changes in penal philosophies; the decades-long War on Drugs; prison resistance movements; changes in American government legislation and economics which have driven it from a welfare state to a security state; prison labor practices; victims’ rights movements and the politics of a conservative ‘tough on crime’ stance; and the various demographic and other impacts of mass incarceration on prisoners’ families.²⁸ Harsh sentencing laws such as California’s three strikes rule, which sentenced inmates to a life in prison regardless of the severity of three crimes; and the 1984 federal Sentencing Reform Act, which abolished parole for federal inmates and guaranteed their serving at least eighty-five percent of their sentence—such make up the panoply of events that are well known and shared among critical prison activists and scholars.

Similarly, many critical prison studies have focused on the *people* who have shaped the narratives of prisoner experiences, resistances, and rights movements. Bruce Franklin’s *The Victim as Criminal and Artist*²⁹ offered the first comprehensive history of prison literature and writers. To Franklin, the main lines of American literature can be traced from the plantation to the penitentiary. These are not peripheral cultural phenomena but something close to the center of the US historical experience as a nation state and thus offer the main key to its usable past.³⁰ Joy James has more recently collected many poignant prisoner stories in her book *The New Abolitionists*,³¹ but there are hundreds of books, magazines, blogs, newsletters, organizations, and networks that document the stories and struggles of the famous, but also less well-known actors who have fought against abusive prison systems and conditions, from both the inside and the outside: George Jackson, Malcolm X, Angela Davis, L. D. Barkley ... the list goes on.

The organization I work with receives hundreds of letters a month documenting the physical as well as psychological abuse, torture, and violence experienced by inmates throughout Pennsylvania’s Middle District prisons and jails. Letters from inmates at the Lewisburg Federal Penitentiary number in the thousands over the past couple of years, describing the civil and human rights abuses currently occurring at that institution (see below). These are essential documentary evidence from people who tell their stories despite the risks involved, exposing the dangerous realities of life behind the penitentiary’s walls. They document a living history in which injustice is a reality. As such these men are creating an alternative collective memory that competes with and challenges the mainstream public record.

Historical geography and the usable carceral past

So in constructing a usable carceral past we could say that identifying key events and people that comprise it has been a steady project of critical prison researchers and activists. But perhaps much of this work has also been to some extent space- and place-blind. The third element

important to people's everyday usable pasts – sites of memory in the material landscape – offers a rich opportunity for historical geographers.

We tend to think of the carceral landscape as hidden from view, secreted away. Though much of it is indeed deliberately “invisible” – prisons are often isolated in out-of-the-way rural areas, as we know³² – once we start paying attention, “the carceral,” just in terms of the corrections industry alone, seems to be just about everywhere. A whole host of carceral sites and scenes rooted in place – physical structures and buildings as well as their representations – are common, ubiquitous components of everyday American life at various scales. From prison towns to individual correctional institutions, their spaces and architectures, museums and tourist sites, memorials, maps, and artistic installations (to name a few) – are material carceral artifacts but also “discourse materialized”: they tell stories about their contents, and in turn are experienced and understood in a wide range of ways. In this sense, the “more than representational” school of human geography has had much to offer the emerging body of carceral geographic work.³³

So I turn now to some examples and suggestions for how historical geographers might further engage in constructing a usable past of ‘mainstream’ corrections. My selections are, admittedly, highly idiosyncratic, based on my own personal experiences and activity spaces, and in that sense are suggestive rather than exhaustive.

“Dark” prison tourism

First, travel to and experience of places associated with death, disaster, and the macabre are increasingly pervasive features of the contemporary tourist landscape. Many sites of incarceration and punishment have become such “dark tourist” sites that commodify suffering, tragedy, and death for public consumption. Their purposes can range, however, across the scales of remembrance, education and study, local history and sightseeing, to pure entertainment.³⁴ Many integrate contemporary tourist activities with historical exhibitions.

Louisiana State Prison at Angola provides a good example. Angola is the largest maximum-security prison in the country; a former (?) slave plantation, it covers eighteen thousand acres, almost the size of Manhattan. In addition to the sprawling housing units that contain over five thousand inmates, Angola features a popular public golf course on prison grounds and a rodeo stadium where, five or six times a year, prisoners perform stunts for thousands of spectators. Such tourism capitalizes on the public's fascination with criminality through the spectacle of live “animalistic” – and untrained – inmates competing in events.³⁵ The Angola museum, gift shop, and Hall of Fame complete the tourist experience.

Many former sites of punishment and incarceration have been converted into museums or heritage sites. Among the most prominent are Alcatraz Island in California, which receives 1.5 million visitors a year (now a part of the US Park Service); Eastern State Penitentiary in Philadelphia, with 250,000 visitors a year; as well as a number of more regional sites (such as Missouri State Penitentiary in Jefferson and Mississippi's Jackson State Prison). Particularly in the past three decades, states and cities with their many decaying former prisons began to turn these “fortress-like piles of stone ... into moneymakers.” Estimates are that there are roughly three-dozen such prison heritage tourist sites throughout the US, with more planned.³⁶

Many historic prisons become tourist sites based on their architectural significance, with local preservation or historical societies supporting their protection. Many survive commercially by “myth-making” – emphasizing famous or celebrity prisoners (such as Al Capone, who was incarcerated at both Alcatraz and Eastern State); dangerous escape attempts; horrific conditions endured by inmates; and through “ghost sightings.” Many scholars agree that these sites can erase as much as they reveal, particularly when it comes to communicating the meaning of imprisonment and punishment to their audiences. Prison museums offer important opportunities to engage

audiences in a conversation about the problems of mass incarceration, but these opportunities are mostly lost.³⁷ Because they are typically positioned as regimes of the past, their narratives tend to be organized around the idea of penal reform—they tend to argue that the carceral present is somehow an improvement over the past. Torture devices; tiny, dark cells; products made by forced inmate labor—these artifacts help narrate a barbarous past that ostensibly compares favorably to the enlightened and civilized present (even if there are actually many more continuities than differences). Such sites also rely on creating a social distance between the punished and the visitor, again producing the “penal spectator whose imagining of punishment is haunted by abstract potentialities of danger and insecurity.”³⁸

Of course, even dark tourism risks turning the usable past into a comfortable past, if the experience is “fun” and surrounded by an entire infrastructure of restaurants, hotels, and other creature comforts intended to draw tourists. As Blake argues, “[a] past that hurts, that scars its victims, that haunts their memories and disrupts their sleep decades later is a past that cannot be easily mobilized in the service of tourism and impression management ... a past that forces us to work through the pain it has inflicted may be a usable past, but it will not be a comfortable one.”³⁹

Eastern State Penitentiary, built in 1829, offers a case in point. Eastern State is considered America’s most “historical” prison, primarily for the role it played in developing American penal philosophy. Philadelphia Quakers are attributed with creating the idea for this first penitentiary, a prison designed to inspire true regret, or penitence, in criminals’ hearts through complete isolation, silence, and individualized labor in cells. Eastern State was a source of debate from the beginning—Charles Dickens was one of its earliest detractors, in 1842—yet its ideals were not abandoned until 1913 when they collided with the reality of overcrowding. The prison did not close until 1971 though, and public tours began in the 1980s.



Figure 1. Corridor at Eastern State Penitentiary, Philadelphia, America’s “most historic prison.” (Photograph by author)

Bruggeman describes Eastern State as preserved in a state of “perpetual ruin ... with raw and terrifying beauty.” It is a massive, crumbling structure that rises up like a medieval castle, complete with ivy covered walls, a tower, corner battlements, and dark and dusty corridors.⁴⁰ I take tours of the facility with my American Studies students and can attest to the cold, damp, repellent atmosphere. Bruggeman covers all the details of the original siting of this prison – and of it later as a tourist site – offering a useful analysis of the relationship between incarceration and its impact on urban space. Its location identifies both historical and present-day “fault lines” across Philadelphia’s race and class topography. Eastern State’s is a story of historic preservationists saving it from the mall developers or other redevelopment plans. Perversely, as more and more African Americans of the neighborhood were sent behind bars, the preservationists benefited from their displacements, and, helped along by tax reforms, opened the neighborhood of row-houses to young white professionals attracted to its “funky charm” when real estate came at bargain prices.⁴¹

Yet the preservationists’ interests were in the institution’s architecture and its Quaker roots, not the stories of its former prisoners and their social milieu. In this and other prison tourist attractions, we should question the purposes that their narratives serve. Are the voices of ordinary prisoners heard? This is particularly an issue since most prison museumgoers tend to be white, educated, and over the age of fifty; that is, not of the same demographic as those incarcerated or those living in the former neighborhoods of the prisons and jails.

Depictions of the social construction of crime itself must also become integrated into these museums if we hope to consider such sites as part of our usable past. In the case of Eastern State, most of those incarcerated in the early nineteenth century were for non-violent crimes such as horse theft and counterfeiting. However, one of the most important factors contributing to the dramatic increase in incarceration in the early twentieth century – as well as the corresponding prison building spree and ultimately the abandonment of the principles upon which Eastern State was established – owed largely to Prohibition, and the criminalization of producing, transporting, and selling of alcohol (although also the criminalization of prostitution, counterfeiting, motor vehicle theft, and tax evasion). Most of Al Capone’s vast sixty million per year franchise was from the selling of beer. Public citizens today need the means to connect the dots. Most are probably not well aware that the Prohibition movement itself lasted from the 1840s to the 1920s; the Eighteenth Amendment to the US Constitution ratified Prohibition in 1919, and then the Twenty-first Amendment repealed it in 1933. Certainly today’s undeniably failed War on Drugs is Prohibition’s parallel, with over 75 percent of federal inmates incarcerated today for non-violent, drug-related charges; and 80 percent of those in state prisons. (Moreover, as Alexander has documented, people of all colors use and sell illegal drugs at the same rates, which again forces us to come to terms with the wildly disproportionate numbers of incarcerated minorities.⁴²)

Meanwhile as massive prison industrial growth continues pretty much unabated (with decreases in some US states compensated by increases in others), the building of new prisons and jails means the decommissioning of others. There are an estimated three hundred decommissioning sites in the US today. As historical geographers we have an opportunity to scrutinize bond issues that control what is being built, what is being torn down, and what is happening with these sites. Presently at issue in my local arena, for instance, is the opening of the new state prison SCI-Benner near State College, Pennsylvania, which will “mothball” two existing ones (SCI-Greensburg and SCI-Cresson). Most of the local news deals with prison employment issues and the private contracting of work in the new facility, but there is an opportunity here as well to pay close attention to this mothballing process. Oftentimes, prisons are closed in order to justify new building projects, but are later re-opened later due to overpopulation pressures.⁴³ Some of those mothballed facilities will undoubtedly, though, come to serve other purposes within the carceral

state (as detention or mental health centers for example), or become tourist attractions, and we would do well to stay vigilant in questioning why and how the carceral state apparatus continues to impact the landscape in these ways.

Small-scale and local heritage sites

My second example also draws from the work of historical societies and heritage commissions – groups that play an important role in constructing and maintaining sites of the carceral past. There are many prisons and jails which might be considered historic: those that have been turned into commercially driven tourist sites but also other heritage sites that are perhaps empty and abandoned, and which have no particular capital-generating potential.

One such site is an abandoned jailhouse in the town of Steinauer, Nebraska. My maternal ancestors, natives of Switzerland, founded the town in 1856 on land that the Otoe-Missouri people of southeastern Nebraska were forced to sell to the government in various installments beginning in 1833, before their eventual removal to Oklahoma Territory in 1876. These Swiss settlers purchased hundreds of acres of Indian land from the federal government in what was then Nebraska Territory (until 1867), for 1.25 per acre. In the early twentieth century the population of the town reached 350, when the railroad still passed through it; today 75 people remain. Friends and family occasionally gather for reunions here, at a former Catholic convent now converted into a bed-and-breakfast. I have to admit that there is something very appealing to me about a remote place in the middle of “nowhere,” where virtually the only functioning businesses are a former convent and a tavern, and where our cell phones don’t work.



Figure 2. Historic Steinauer (Nebraska) Jail, originally located behind the town’s tavern. (Photograph by Lana Miller)

Nineteen of the still-standing structures in the town are now listed in the Nebraska Historical Society registry.⁴⁴ Not listed among them, however, is the town jail. This jail appears to be made for a single individual, standing room only. Local sources say it was originally located behind the tavern, which likely made its most frequent function to detain drunk or disorderly locals until they sobered up.⁴⁵

This was a period in Nebraska Territory history when the crime of “chicken stealing” could land you a year in the state penitentiary (which opened in 1867), yet you could escape punishment for lynching southern sympathizers (the “Jay-Hawkers”) for stealing horses. As I have not yet had the opportunity to consult the Steinauer Village Board meeting minutes, which would likely offer a fuller account of the use, occupants, and jurisdiction of the jail, it is easy to consider the possibility that it was simply installed by the local people for their own purposes, outside of the “official” legal system, to the extent that that attribution meant much at the time.

Such jails are briefly mentioned in the *Nebraska Territorial Statutes of 1866*, which notes that the county sheriff deputized people in the villages to handle the drunk and disorderly.⁴⁶ The statutes required that the sheriff, or his deputized “jailer,” keep a jail register and examine the conditions of any prisoners at least once each month. If this jailer failed at any of his duties (being guilty of “negligence or misconduct”), he was to be fined not less than five dollars. It was the duty of the county commissioners to visit each jail four times per year (once during each of their sessions), and to provide the basic necessities for them, including “warming for the jail, sacks for beds, and a night bucket.” The statutes also required that the cells be cleaned at least three times per year.

By 1912, the State Board of Charities and Corrections reported that there were two hundred such (or similar) “lockups” throughout the state. They reported that

many of these resemble stalls or pens with very little, if any, accommodations for the prisoners. As a rule they are much more unsanitary than the county jails. About 20,000 prisoners are thrown into these places during the year, a large number of them being arrested for drunkenness or vagrancy, and are held only a few hours; many of whom are tramps ... [their] conditions [are] even more appalling than those found in county jails.⁴⁷

Anecdotally, there are many such town jails throughout the state of Nebraska still standing. They offer historical geographers important insights into how concepts of criminal behavior intersected with social marginalization and exclusion in early American settlement farming communities, particularly insights into how vagrancy and homelessness were understood and criminalized. We have an opportunity here to study further how such communities understood their own industriousness and ‘safety’ in relation to the more nomadic. These I think are particularly compelling questions if we consider that such carceral settings were, again, likely operating outside of official (albeit developing) western legal frameworks.

Prisons as living memory

Many correctional facilities operating today have undergone tremendous structural and ideological shifts over their life cycle, and as such may contain “living memories” that are somehow incorporated into their present. I take as a third example then, Muncy State Women’s Prison, located twenty minutes up the road from my house, the only maximum-security facility for women in the state of Pennsylvania. I recently took a tour of this prison, and colleagues from my university regularly participate in the Inside/Outside college curriculum program there.



Figure 3. Pennsylvania's SCI-Muncy, opened as Muncy Industrial Home for Women in 1920. (Photograph by author)

Muncy opened in 1920 as the state “Industrial Home for Women,” a reformatory and training school created under the auspices of the Department of Welfare, but which in 1953 was transferred to the Department of Corrections. The home was founded to help troubled, “fallen” young women restore their “moral virtue” through training and instruction in domestic duties such as sewing, housekeeping, and food preparation.⁴⁸ The institution opened with nine housing units, referred to as “cottages,” with thirty women (“residents”) assigned to each under the care of a house “matron.” While both the purpose of the institution and its attendant philosophies of reform have undergone structural and programmatic shifts in its nearly one hundred year history, today we see more social and spatial continuities with the past than breaks from it.

The early reformatory movement (1920-1970) emphasized the moral dimensions of women's "fallen" state. The subsequent "therapeutic regime" (1970-1999) held to the belief that women's criminal problems stemmed primarily from mental illness and/or victimhood. Programming during this period emphasized helping clients through emotional control therapy, parenting classes, drug and alcohol abuse counseling, and treatment programs for sexual abuse and domestic violence.⁴⁹ The War on Drugs and changes in sentencing laws ushered in a third "custodial period" that characterizes the institution today (1999-); the grounds were fenced and "SCI-Muncy" transitioned to conventional prison policies.⁵⁰ It now consists of 18 units which house 1700 inmates, 5 of whom are on death row, and 150 of whom are serving life sentences without the possibility of parole. In the shift to this latest period, incarcerated women were discouraged from using terminology associated with the earlier periods: cottages were renamed as "units," residents became "inmates," and matrons became "correctional officers." In 1997, uniforms for both residents and matrons replaced the regular day clothing that both had worn previously.

According to Silberman, because Pennsylvania has a decentralized prison administrative system, the distinctive local traditions of older prisons such as Muncy can continue.⁵¹ And indeed, the ethos of both the reformatory movement and that of the therapeutic community regime have been folded into the current institutional structure, despite the current custodial crackdown. Perhaps most notable is that early twentieth century gendered norms of women's reform persist at the institution, for instance in job training that focuses on traditional women's work such as sewing and gardening. A full-fledged correctional-industry sewing factory was opened on the premises in 1989 (and this, at time when most of the US garment trade had moved overseas). The notion also persists that women who commit crimes are essentially victims of men, needy and emotionally dependent individuals who are driven to crime by their dependent natures. Forty-one percent of the inmates today are classified as mentally ill and receive medication; and all the inmates' days are structured around therapeutic activities and spaces. On the day I toured Muncy I chatted with the officer giving the tour as we watched inmates playing with therapy dogs on the lawn; he confided his belief that almost all of the criminality of the Muncy women was a result of their association with corrupt men.

Such gender stereotypes obviously require some deconstruction, particularly to the extent that they are embedded into the law (e.g. with the *Muncy Act* of 1913). Similar to the usable pasts of other institutions and sites, the Muncy prison, despite seeming to offer a more humanizing therapeutic rehabilitation model of incarceration, also denies agency to women inmates to an important extent. But those stereotypes aside, the notion that Muncy incorporates living history in both its structure and philosophies of punishment is an important one. How we understand regime shifts in the carceral landscape is one of the crucial questions scholars struggle with, and I think the Muncy prison offers a good example of how we might stay attuned to a living past, the past in place, as we study those shifts. And while some prison administrations offer ample opportunity to capture living memory, others work very hard to erase it, as my next example illustrates.

Violence, punishment, and space in US federal penitentiaries

As I noted above, the prisoner rights group I am affiliated with has lately shifted most of its attention to the Lewisburg federal penitentiary, located just outside the quaint little college town I live in. This prison was built as a regular penitentiary in 1932 during the "reform era" in US prisonization. But beginning in 2008 the Federal Bureau of Prisons began transforming it into the first Special Management Unit (SMU) prison of its kind in the country. This recent dramatic shift in the use of space at the facility has resulted in five deaths, hundreds of assaults requiring

hospitalization, and thousands of letters to our organization from inmates who describe the torturous conditions inside that have now become the norm and which I have written about elsewhere.⁵²

When USP-Lewisburg was built in 1932 its architecture reflected an ideology of reform and rehabilitation of its 1,200 male inmates. It was considered the most “modern” prison of its day, and others throughout the US were later modeled after it. Its architecture was meant to appear as little like a conventional prison as possible, for instance in giving it a “monastic atmosphere” – offering spaces for contemplation, study, and enlightenment.



Figure 4. View of the Lewisburg Penitentiary 9 October 1947. Robert Tebbs, photographer. (Courtesy of the National Archives)

The spatial configuration of the prison reflected the philosophy that both work and play were necessary for rehabilitation. The architect chose the rural Pennsylvania site ostensibly for the sunshine and fresh air available there, as well as for the available land on which inmates could farm poultry, dairy cattle, hay, corn, and other crops. The prison interior also featured a number of spaces for reform within it: inmates participated in a variety of sports including basketball, baseball, long jump, boxing, and weight lifting; others were active in musical and theatrical groups that performed on the auditorium stage (where big acts such as Louis Armstrong also performed); inmates worked in the metal workshop; others produced a newspaper; and ten classrooms, a library, and reading room offered spaces for education, training, and religious services.

This almost pastoral picture of life at the Lewisburg prison likely never mapped onto any sort of reality, and in any case the Bureau’s ideology of reform and rehabilitation suffered a short life span. By the 1970s the discourse of reform completely lost traction within the federal

prison bureaucracy and in the courts, and stood in stark contrast to the norms and practices of everyday life inside penitentiary walls. Guard brutality, overcrowding, unsafe working conditions, infrastructural deterioration, and inmate civil rights challenges led to a breakdown in the Bureau's ability to control its facilities, and uprisings occurred with increasing frequency. Ultimately, the Bureau addressed its problems through an increasing use of solitary confinement and permanent lockdown as a primary method of prison control.

As I noted above, more than 75 percent of federal inmates are incarcerated for non-violent drug crimes, typically for transporting drugs. This is important to keep in mind, since nearly all those incarcerated in maximum-security lockdown are isolated *not* for the crime that put them in prison in the first place, but for some infraction that happened *during* incarceration. Most of them have been labeled as gang leaders, and/or have assaulted correctional staff or other prisoners.

Lewisburg is the first and only maximum-security federal prison in the country today with an SMU program of its type. Community spaces such as exercise yards, sports courts, the communal dining room, the library, and theatre have been emptied. Today, inmates from around the country are sent to this facility for a two-year program of "readjustment." The men are kept in twenty-four hour a day lockdown, two men to each tiny cell, for the two-year duration. Five hours per week they are transferred to eight-by-ten foot recreation cages to exercise with six to eight other men.

The Bureau makes clear that the double celling practice is not due to overcrowding or economics. Interviewed by *The Wall Street Journal*, a Bureau spokeswoman said that Lewisburg inmates are deliberately housed in pairs to teach them how to "coexist with others." Without going into detail about the macho staff code or the inmate gang code that structures life there, it is easy to see how increased violence is a guaranteed outcome of this regime. Even if cellmates are compatible – and we must ask, who would be or could be under these conditions? – the system is designed to create tension and violence. Men co-exist in spaces so small that only one of them may walk in the cell at any given time. The aim of the Lewisburg SMU is not the stemming of violence and pathology within the American federal penal system, but rather to reproduce it, to provoke and perpetuate criminality – in short, to keep prisoners locked up and "the machine" going. This seems especially the case given the context of the SMU and supermax facilities more generally, where the criminality at issue is a product of incarceration itself, created within the prison walls rather than on the outside. The violence self-perpetuates the institution, and indeed signals the need for additional facilities. Such dehumanizing practices are part of the fabric of prison life and always have been, but today, that alienation is going even further.

The present situation at Lewisburg is a serious concern. My research about it is situated as an historical geography of the modern to the late modern penitentiary form, in terms of both spatial tactics and penal philosophies.⁵³ Certainly, uncovering the ideas and intentionalities that were built into the prison in 1932 offers a rich usable past from we can understand just how far the institution has devolved today in terms of inmate civil and human rights. Moreover, although the use of prison space has been completely altered by the introduction of the SMU program, the physical structure and particularly the architecture of the prison stands as a constant reminder of former ideas and practices.

A number of local entities and practices are also involved in constructing a usable past for the institution. The Lewisburg Historical Society regularly publishes materials and hosts events about the beautiful historic architecture of the prison building, and its bell tower certainly serves as an inescapable historical-cultural icon in the region.⁵⁴ That the prison is a site of memory for the townspeople cannot be overstated either, especially considering that work in corrections is one of the main local occupations (that, and university professor). The experiences and habits of guards and administrators of yesteryear are a constant source of conversation in ordinary settings – at

schools, supermarkets, hair salons, and in bars. I hear stories ranging from the truly vicious—how the warden known as “Ax-Handle Fenton” used to beat inmates with an ax handle in the 1970s; to the more sublime—the former practice of giving apples to inmates at Christmastime for the tacitly approved making of moonshine.

Where prisons are located now is a product of past spatial logics and priorities, which often emerged under different social, economic, and political circumstances. In the case of Lewisburg, the town fought hard for the prison as a panacea to growth during the Depression. The Bureau of Prisons was flooded with over one hundred applications for what was to become the Northeastern Federal Penitentiary, and Lewisburg was selected both for reasons already mentioned and also due to near unanimous support from the community (including from the administration of Bucknell University).⁵⁵ Local authorities lobbying for prisons hope that they will bring economic development, and are supported by the misbegotten idea that location away from urban centers is useful in some way. And as is the case with the Lewisburg penitentiary and others like it, the spatial fixity and spatial legacy of the institution has created its own local geography with multiple and diverse spin-out effects for townspeople who now occupy a place specializing in prisons; as well as, of course, for prisoners and their families who typically are from long distances away. These locational issues of the past have so much present relevance, and are very hard to undo.

Despite the complaints and lawsuits piling up that contest current practices, however, the prison administration remains very proud of the institution and its history, and particularly of its famous inmates. When I toured the facility in 2009 (a practice no longer available to our organization due to the administration’s claims of “security precautions”), I marveled at the trophy case in the front hall, which features historic artifacts of notorious American crime figures who have served time there. These include Mafia bosses and labor and other leaders connected to them (Jimmy Hoffa, John Gotti); but also famous civil rights activists and political prisoners (such as Alger Hiss, and Philip and Daniel Berrigan); and suspected terrorists and drug kingpins. Perhaps such “trophies” are typical features of most prisons. More important though, are any usable pasts of the thousands and thousands of more anonymous inmates who have passed through the gates, and who certainly have no local connections and no other “voice” in the town.

Their histories pop up in a number of books and films though, including a 1991 Academy Award nominated documentary entitled, *Doing Time: Life Inside the Big House*. The film depicts the humiliations and rank conditions present in the Lewisburg facility, including some poignant scenes of guards referring to the place as a “zoo” and inmates responding by “woofing” like dogs or wolves for the cameras, and declaring, “we’re dying.”⁵⁶ What experiences comprise their memory of the institution, having served time there – what interactions and relationships, what transformations, what traumas, what scars? At the time of this writing, a segment from their work, *Rap About Lewisburg Federal Penitentiary*, is available on YouTube, and I would encourage those interested to watch and listen.⁵⁷

Conclusion: interventions – transforming history into art

It may seem that “the carceral,” even limited to just correctional institutions, “is everywhere” to someone like me, who lives in a place (central Pennsylvania) known for a heavy prison industrial complex but which also has the reputation of having a ‘backward’ prison system. However, while specific carceral techniques might be expressed differently across the American landscape, no place in the country has been untouched by the current trends in mass incarceration. Just up the road from the Steinauer jail I discussed above is the new Nebraska State Penitentiary (in Tecumseh), which advertises through billboards all the job opportunities opening up for so many displaced by the more recent decline of the rural farm economy. This is

where we are and this is what, in turn, requires intervention and the exercise of civil liberties on behalf of inmates.

There are many options for doing so, particularly for educators. We should never underestimate the transformative power of art, for instance, as with the Kafka museum's imaginative reconstruction of the modern torture machine. I would like to conclude then with some thoughts about using media or art in constructing a usable carceral past.

Here I want to return to Angola. This past January our prisoner rights group (LPP) sponsored, along with the Bucknell Geography Department and others, a film event at our local theatre, featuring a new documentary called *Herman's House*, and a talk by the film's director, Angad Bhalla.⁵⁸ The film addresses the injustice of solitary confinement and the transformative power of art by highlighting a friendship and collaboration between a New York artist and one of America's most famous inmates, Herman Wallace, who was confined in a solitary prison cell at Angola for forty years, the longest of any inmate in the country (and who was finally released days before dying of liver cancer last October). Wallace and Albert Woodfox were first subjected to solitary confinement in 1972, following the killing of a twenty-three year old prison guard. The men—the two remaining of the “Angola 3”—contend that they were targeted by prison authorities and convicted of the murder not based on the actual evidence but because of their association with the Black Panthers. This political affiliation also accounts for their seemingly permanent stay in solitary confinement.

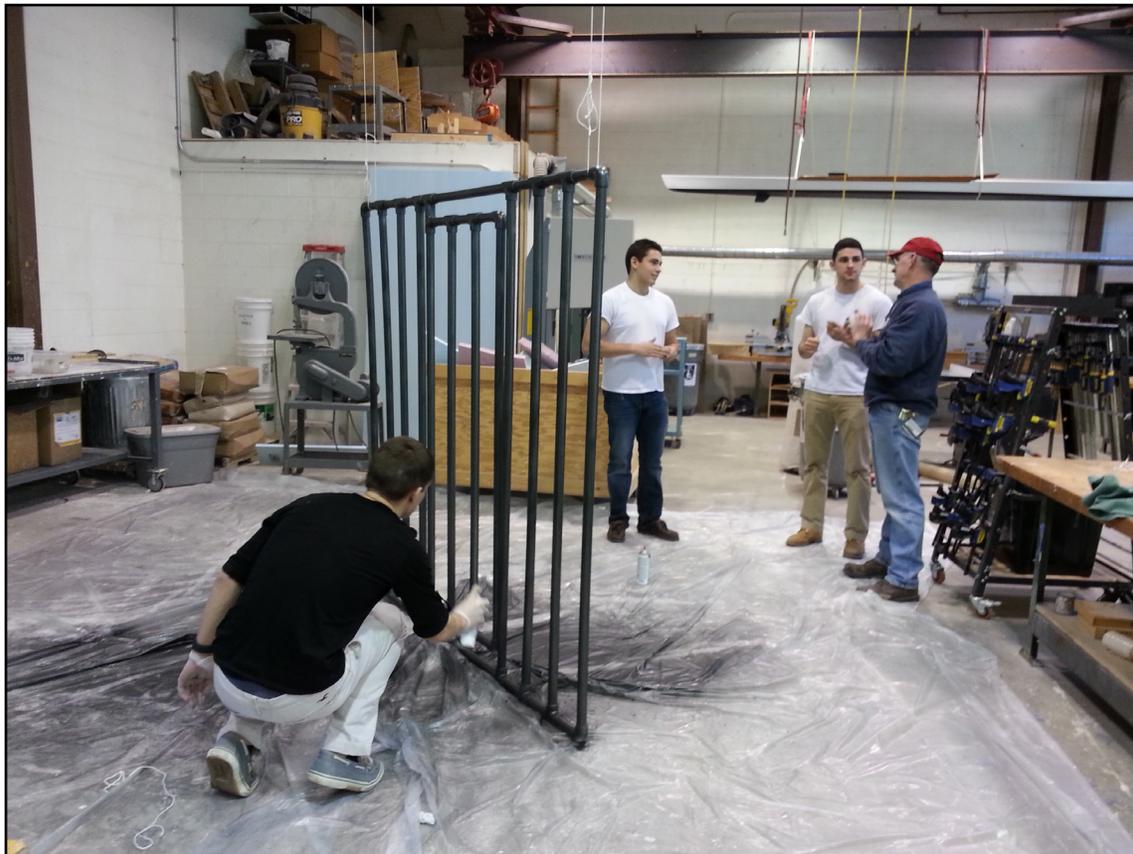


Figure 5. Bucknell University students begin building a life-size 6 x 9 solitary confinement cell to commemorate Herman Wallace's 40+ years of confinement, the longest of any American prisoner. (Photograph by author)

Related to this film screening, LPP partnered with some Bucknell students to build a life-size, six-by-nine foot prison cell that was displayed in the student center for several days prior to the film showing, and then moved to the theatre the night of the event. The installation gave the students and broader community a chance to experience something of the environment of solitary confinement—a deliberate remembrance for Herman Wallace and others subjected to that particular torture. Meanwhile another group of students created a film about the building and installation of the cell, and interviewed students who had spent time in it. This turned into a film “short” that was shown the night of *Herman’s House*. The whole experience was an important intervention in town politics. It also helped students and others explore issues in our criminal justice system, the psychological effects of solitary confinement, and I think, ultimately, how the creative process of art can be used to initiate positive change and greater understanding of social justice issues.

We are all going to make a difference; the question is, what kind of difference do we want to make?

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 - 10 Dominique Moran, “Carceral Geography and the Spatialities of Prison Visiting: Visitation, Recidivism, and Hyperincarceration,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 31 (2013): 174–190; 175. See also Jenna Loyd, Matt Mitchelson, and Andrew Burridge, eds., *Beyond Walls and Cages: Prisons, Borders, and Global Crisis* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2012).
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 - 25 *Ibid.*, 167, 173.
 - 26 *Ibid.*, 150-161.
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