Bodies and Things Confined: Archaeological Approaches to Control and Detention

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Prison Work

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home out of reach for many, and resignation is understandable. I became interested in prison ethos—the “system of organization of the instincts and emotions of the individuals” (Bateson, Naven, 1958), what emotional expression is allowed, what emotions are too dangerous to feel—when several inmates revealed that they no longer exercise, although gym facilities are available, because “it gets me worked up, and then I get too angry.” I hear a different, but related, concern from middle-aged men who, after years in a single cell, no longer tolerate living in a dormitory and beg to return to maximum security confinement. In both groups I perceive the loss of social confidence and I worry about their post-release future. It is already hard enough to make a life with the stigma of a felony record. Rejoining society also requires the ability to handle anger and negotiate rough-and-tumble differences, something these men have lost.

The ethos of suppressed emotion and constrained response affects all segments of prison life, and I find myself not responding, or responding with unnatural calm, to events that I know I feel strongly about. My colleagues report similar experiences. Nevertheless, we can leave and recover at the end of the day, something not available to the men whose lives we witness and whose stories we listen to. I am grateful for my education in anthropology. Grounding in the “most ‘radically contextualizing’ of the social sciences” (Farmer 1999) opens my perception to things outside my job description. We need more conversation about incarceration in the US; I appreciate the opportunity that AN provides for joining that conversation.

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Bodies and Things Confined

Archaeological Approaches to Studying Control and Detention

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As archaeologists increasingly turn their attention to the recent past and even the present day, we find that our methods are particularly well-suited to investigating violence and conflict (eg, Schofiel et al’s Matériel Culture: The Archaeology of Twentieth Century Conflict), exile and imprisonment (eg, Casella’s The Archaeology of Institutional Confinement), and many other “excesses of modernity” (see González-Ruibal’s “Time to Destroy: An Archaeology of Supermodernity”). One area of research that is under continuing development is the archaeology of prisons and internment camps. This archaeological approach to often unjust detention has the unique ability to connect material remains with traumatic personal memories and gaps in historical records. In an era when imprisonment is commonplace, it also enables us to address pressing questions about our own present and potential futures.

The interment of criminals, enemy aliens, ethnic minorities, political prisoners, displaced persons, prisoners of war, the sick and now “enemy combatants”—who are often confined without trial or legal representation in temporary or hastily constructed camps—is one of the defining characteristics of social and military conflict. From the earliest modern civilian internment camps established by the Spanish in Cuba, to Auschwitz, Cold War East Berlin and countless other first century appear primed to continue the trend.

The Second World War in particular was a period of widespread development and use of various types of mass internment—such as death camps, transit camps, relocation centers and Prisoner of War camps—but many facilities from this era have already disappeared entirely or are now only visible as traces. Urban expansion and the reuse of agricultural land have wiped out many, and others have been reclaimed by forests. This reveals that despite their affective power, their clear historic import, and their often significant structures and physical impact on the land, sites of incarceration are often surprisingly fragile and transient places.

An Archaeology of Internment

In light of both our disturbing tendency to control and detain, and the ephemeral nature of many of these sites of detention, it seems appropriate to apply an anthropologically-informed archaeology to the critical examination of institutions of internment. The archaeology of internment emerges as an interest area associated with the study of modernity and situated within the wider contexts of conflict archaeology, material culture studies and historical archaeology. I demonstrate below how the concepts of spatiality and materiality are particularly appropriate for helping us come to terms with imprisonment in the archaeological record.

Archaeological survey of aboveground remains of prison sites—from landscapes to the interior layouts of buildings and rooms—can provide new information about the nature of, and the relationship between, spatiality and power in prisons. In her exploration of the potential for archaeological work at the Long Kesh/Maze prison site, McAtackney suggests that archaeology of such sites and related artifacts can be used to explore how both prisoners and prison officers negotiated relationships with their surroundings. As a partial test of how power relations might have affected the built environment, we could, for example, compare the original documentary plans for the construction of the site with how it was actually built and adapted over time, including, in McAtackney’s words, “what alterations by the prison authorities and subversions by the prisoners occurred” (“Long Kesh/Maze: An Archaeological Opportunity,” British Archaeology 84).

Even in cases of extreme deprivation, such as in prisons and concentration camps, people have continually interacted with and through material goods. By combining data obtained from landscape and building surveys with data obtained through targeted excavations, we can learn about the spatial distribution of artifacts and how this distribution relates to larger hypotheses about spatiality and power relations. Such a study of the context of excavated artifacts would provide fascinating insights into prisoners’ and prison workers’ daily lives, emotional states, social relationships, economic interactions and articulations of conflicts or resistance.

Small Finds, Small Stories

One fruitful way to think about internment site artifacts themselves is to consider the potential of Cochran and Beaudry’s notion of “small finds” and the “small stories” that follow (in The Cambridge Companion to Historical Archaeology 2006). Ronald Hirte’s Buchenwald “Found Objects” project (www.buchenwald.de) has perhaps inadvertently demonstrated the potential to apply the small finds approach to Nazi concentration camps. Hirte excavated several World War II-era Buchenwald middens, collecting thousands of found objects that recall everyday life in the camp. Hirte notes:

The majority of them were made or improvised by the inmates themselves from scraps of various materials; many of them changed hands more than once. They include
 Anthology News seeks contributions for a thematic issue on veterans of military conflicts. We welcome proposals from all areas of anthropology; by anthropologists who study, work with or teach veterans; and by anthropologists who are veterans themselves, in the US or internationally. This topic includes not only veterans as traditionally conceived, but also other participants in situations of conflict, such as child soldiers, military contractors, peacekeepers and aid workers.

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