Picturing the Carceral Landscape: Ideology, Industry, and Impending Prison Growth in Appalachia

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Introduction

In earlier work, I have inquired into prison growth and penal tourism in Kentucky, arguing that the carceral state has structured a visual and analytical register that limits our abilities to see it in appropriate contexts and with historical acuity (Schept, 2014a). In eastern Kentucky, prisons built on top of coalmines and marketed through a familiar refrain of rural economic development suggest their place as the economic future of the region. Using this dubious claim as a point of departure, my work examining sites of prison growth has suggested that the landscape of the region can be mobilized to confirm this rather narrow narrative but also can be understood, through a particular counter-visual approach, as narrating a much broader material history of the uneven development that has resulted in the contemporary carceral moment.

In the 2013-2014 SJRP grant cycle, I broadened my analysis to include the possible future carceral landscape alongside its durable present. The central Appalachian region is already home to 16 prisons, half of which are in eastern Kentucky. Despite the saturation of facilities, the political and legislative attention to prison reform, and the mounting evidence that prisons do not, in fact, bring the rural economic development that they promise, eastern Kentucky may well get its 9th prison imminently. The Federal Bureau of Prisons (BOP) is considering building its fourth facility in eastern Kentucky
and has narrowed down six potential sites to one: a 700 acre plot in Upper Mountain County, KY that would straddle and consume multiple private properties. As Upper Mountain County awaited (and is still waiting on) the results of the BOP’s Environmental Impact Study (EIS), the site under consideration offered a fascinating opportunity to conduct a historical and cultural geography of place with an informed eye towards it probable carceral future.

Methods

My research this year included multiple trips to the site proposed for the new facility, substantial photography on site, informal conversations with area residents, and archival research into the material and cultural history and geography of the area. As has been the case in previous years, I worked in close partnership with my colleague and consultant, Jill Frank, MFA, whose photography and visual analysis have been instrumental in the progression and success of this research. Some of her images from this past year are included below.

In looking to the carceral landscape of Appalachia, in particular two eastern Kentucky communities staking their economic futures on prisons, my work makes several interrelated claims. First, recent legislative efforts toward sentencing reform in a number of states, including Kentucky, and growing consensus about the need to “end mass incarceration now” (New York Times, 2014) belie a disturbing practice in rural communities—at least in Kentucky—of continued carceral growth. Using photographs of current, former, and future sites for prisons, my work argues that paying attention to landscape, and in particular the ideology of landscape, is instructive for perceiving a carceral common sense animated less by discourses of crime and punishment than by
rural economic development. That is, photographs of the land itself put the prison into the same analytical orbit as coal and allows for a more capacious sense of the prison in contemporary American capitalism. Second, and more specific to the SJRP 2013-14 research, my work uses photographs from the site in Upper Mountain to consider how landscapes that portend carceral growth might be productive for considerations of what could be there instead. In looking at landscapes where former uses of coal and future uses of prison remain “at the edge of site”—on the temporal and visual ends of the frame, not visible but structuring what we see—are there opportunities to disturb what Shawn Michelle Smith (2013), following Walter Benjamin (1968/1936), calls the “ocular unconscious” and to begin to inscribe a new counter visual and counter carceral common sense? Once we can “see” the prison in its historical and spatial contingencies, might it be possible to “un-see” it, that is, to view landscapes outside of their carceral contours and imagine alternatives?

In decentering and indeed offering an intervention into work that centralizes legal, policy and cultural changes in its analysis of the carceral state, this paper aligns with recent work that begins to delineate a critical carceral studies (Brown, 2014; Schept, 2014a; Loyd, Mitchelson, & Burridge, 2012). As Michelle Brown has recently argued, carceral studies is “bound up with mapping more carefully the many configurations of confinement across neoliberal landscapes by looking for their root causes at the intersections of capitalism and shifting state formations amid globalization” (Brown, 2014, p. 178). The task for scholars, she argues, is to engage in and offer analysis of and through counter-visual imagery of carcerality

**Findings and Discussion**
The majority of the acreage under consideration by the BOP belongs to one family. They graciously provided me with access to their property. Behind the home and large garden where the family has homesteaded since the early 1970s, a gravel road meanders—sometimes precipitously—up into the mountains that form most of the site’s acreage. The family runs a small coal company and in the early 1980s had the mountaintop blown off of the main peak on their property in order to mine the site. It is at once breathtakingly beautiful and deeply disturbing to stand at the top of a mountain top removal (MTR) site. It is unmistakable that you are at the top of a mountain, since you are almost level with lush peaks that surround you. But your immediate surroundings are remarkable for more than what seems like their primordial beauty—you are at the top of a mountain and it is so flat: hundreds of acres of flat, open expanse (Images 1-3). Whether up there while afternoon rain sprinkles and fog dips in and out of the peaks or up there for sunrise, the land is impossibly stunning and also disorienting.

In a fascinating if distressing alignment, the past uses of the acreage and the capital invested in them created the very infrastructural conditions that makes the site very suitable for the BOP. With the peak blown off, the site is vast and can easily accommodate several large facilities (and it should be noted that the BOP is technically proposing two to sit at the same site: one, a United States Penitentiary and the other a Federal Prison Camp). There are water and gas lines already in place and there are buildings with electricity at the top. The general area is remote but accessible and accustomed to traffic because of a strip-mine just two miles away (Image 4). There is one two lane country road that approaches the property and, as of now, just a gravel access.
road that goes up to the site. The prison would be able to determine the entries and exits, to say nothing of the vantages.

But while the site is certainly off the beaten path, one of the more striking features of the 200 acres is just how central they seem to the lives of Upper Mountain residents. Mushroom hunters come up regularly during the season. They are so regular, in fact, that the owners have provided several with keys to the gate to the access road. They also have booked a variety of events on the site, including a weekend bluegrass festival during which acts such as Bill Monroe and Ralph Stanley played to 6,000 people. There are routine weddings, family reunions and church retreats that occur on the site. Finally, a local group of model airplane enthusiasts go up because the flat and high expanse offers ideal topography to fly. Indeed, a small blacktop runway, a large commemorative sign, and a structure all suggest the presence of the group on site (Images 5-7). The sign reads “Mountain Flyers Model Aircraft Field. Any person that never flies in their lifetime is as a bird that is reared in captivity. To live, grow old and die, never to have known it had wings with which to soar the sky!” The quote itself and its placement on a sign partly covered up by overgrown brush seemed like indexes of the truly liminal state of the site, simultaneously recreational, semi-public and inclusive; surplus and derelict absent the mining that stopped decades ago; and portending the impending injection of carceral growth. The cultural significance of the site to area residents may or may not register in the BOP’s EIS process. But if the Bureau does indeed build, it will be far more than coal extraction that gets buried underneath the institutions of exclusion that will once again rise in the mountains.
In addition to examining the relationships between coal and prison, my research contributes to contemporary treatments of the possible reform of the carceral state. There is certainly evidence that rhetoric of punishment is changing and some legislation along with it. Kentucky is just one of more than two-dozen states pursuing “justice reinvestment” legislative and administrative reform designed to reduce prison populations. And yet, my research in Appalachia suggests that it’s political economic restructuring (projected onto the rural landscape) that is animating prison changes and not changing legal norms and statutes in Frankfort and Washington, D.C. In addition, and precisely because legislative reform in Kentucky is decidedly not slowing down prison growth, political economic changes are also structuring social relations in Appalachia. Indeed, it would seem that communities in the region are considering changes to educational curricula to prepare a labor force for jobs as prison guards. The vocational high school in Upper Mountain recently started a criminal justice and law track; the county newspaper quotes the Assistant Superintendent for the county as noting that the new program, which includes a mock courtroom and a firing range, is necessary because:

“2,559 criminal justice-related positions now exist within a 40-mile radius of Upper Mountain, and that more positions are expected to be created with the opening of federal prison planned for Upper Mountain.” Indeed, a second article projected between 300-450 new federal jobs, projections that came directly from US Representative Hal Roger’s office.

Projections for new jobs and the preparations in the county those projections animate belie a growing body of research that rather firmly disrupts the linear calculus of prison growth bringing jobs to the local community and stimulating economic
development. This work suggests that not only do prisons not stimulate economic growth, but also for the most impoverished communities they have obstructed it (Hooks et al. 2010, 2004; King, Mauer and Huling 2003). Indeed, journalist Sylvia Ryerson (2013) has astutely noted that the three Kentucky counties with existing federal prisons remain three of the poorest in one of the poorest congressional districts in the United States.

Legal reforms and the growing acceptability of calls to end mass incarceration belie a number of realities “on the ground” that suggest the carceral state’s stability and even expansion. Of course, the legal reforms themselves may prove to simply trans-carcerate rather than decarcerate, moving prisoners from state Departments of Correction to municipal jails and local supervision. But even if we can afford the benefit of the doubt to the passage of legislation like Kentucky’s HB 463, it is incongruous with the breaking ground in Appalachia for new prison construction if we don’t acknowledge that prison growth is not solely about the dubious connection between crime, law and punishment. It is only in acknowledging Appalachia’s place as a “national sacrifice zone” (Scott, 2010) a regional role only possible through the simultaneous cultural construction of Appalachian identity and its central, if at times obfuscated, place in American economy, that prison growth in a time of critique actually follows some central logics of capital and the state.

Moreover, by paying attention to the ideology of landscape—the ‘particular means of organizing and experiencing the visual order of those things on the land’ (Mitchell, 2003: 242)—that new vantages can be enabled. Following Mitchell (2003; 2000), the carceral landscape performs important work, simultaneously erasing the
relations of production that produced it while also aestheticizing—normalizing—the results through the authorial narrative that tells Appalachian residents to take pride in coal and prison.

Considering carceral landscapes for their ideological work perhaps opens important lines of intervention. Fredric Jameson has noted that “the aesthetic act is itself ideological, and the production of aesthetic or narrative form is to be seen as an ideological act in its own right, with the function of inventing imaginary or formal “solutions” to unresolvable social contradictions” (1981, 79). It is perhaps in gesturing to these social contradictions, and attempting to offer a new aesthetic, a counter-carceral and counter-visual sense of possibility, to which this paper ultimately hopes to contribute.

Publications and Next Steps

This research has led to publications in both academic and public venues, including a single-authored article in *Theoretical Criminology* (Schept 2014a) and blog contributions to Tennessee Students and Educators for Social Justice (Schept 2014b) and the Reclaim Justice Network, based out of The Centre for Crime and Justice Studies in the United Kingdom (Schept 2013). In all three cases, my work was solicited for publication. In addition, I consulted on a Canada-based documentary film examining prison landscapes and economic transitions and joined the crew for a shoot in eastern Kentucky. Finally, I have another article in preparation based on the more recent research from this past year’s grant cycle and have begun to field inquiries from presses about the possibility of a book, including from The University of California Press.
Images

1.
References


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1 Upper Mountain County is a pseudonym