(Un) Seeing like a Prison: Counter-Visual Ethnography of the Carceral State

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Introduction

Building on work conducted through a 2011-12 School of Justice Studies Research grant, my work during the past year inquired further into the material and symbolic growth of incarceration in Kentucky communities. Consulting with photographer, Georgia State University Lecturer, and Kentucky native Jill Frank, I integrated visual methods into my inquiry and developed an analysis more attuned to the ocular-ideological work of mass incarceration in structuring the visual register of prisons in the landscape. My work occurred in diverse settings across the state, including a Bed and Breakfast I call The Guard’s Guesthouse, built on and in an old county jail and gallows and haunted by the ghosts of its former prisoners, and Appalachian towns aiming to recuperate deindustrialized economies through prison siting. It was in these rural communities that I observed prisons built on top of old farms, former sites of strip mining, and coal ash dumpsites, and heard the familiar refrain of prison growth as the only economic development alternative to a coal industry in its fourth decade of decline. Seeing the inseparability—physical, political economic, and cultural—between coal and prison in eastern Kentucky directed me to place both in the same analytical orbit. Both ‘dirty’ industries rely on the same people—literally—to perform their ‘dirty’ work in places that elude any kind of democratized gaze: under the ground, inside the mountain, and behind the barbed wire and walls. The prison’s place after and literally on top of coal—their historical, spatial, and economic continuity—suggests that the narrow
narrative of rural economic development (which is itself a dubious tale that existing research contradicts) buries other stories that could be told about these two industries. In both Appalachia and the *Guard’s Guesthouse*, my research focused on the way that carceral ideology works through space and times to structure its own common sense.

**Methods**

This ongoing project relies on visual-ethnographic methods. Jill and I spent time at *The Guard’s Guesthouse* and in eastern Kentucky communities studying the visual register and history of various carceral landscapes and chatting with local people. In a forthcoming article in *Theoretical Criminology*, I argue that the methods required for this particular research are instructive for a broader consideration of the ideological work of the carceral state in structuring the available vocabularies and vantages we have for perceiving it. Thus, methods at once help in perceiving the problem and reveal that the problem often structures and constrains the utility of the method.

**Importance and Relevance**

The importance of researching carceral growth and the culture of punishment in Kentucky cannot be overstated. The state experienced massive prison expansion during the latter part of the twentieth century, with the state prison population growing by 442%, from 3,723 prisoners in 1980 to 20,200 in 2010, contributing to the United States’ distinction as the global leader in imprisonment. Between 2000 and 2010, the rate of incarceration jumped 45%, more than tripling the average growth rate in other states during the same decade.¹ Of course, growth in the state’s prison population has accompanied the proliferation of prisons in the rural landscape. Sixteen prisons (eight state facilities, six federal facilities, and two private facilities) operate in central
Appalachia across Kentucky, West Virginia, Virginia, and Tennessee. Eastern Kentucky is home to eight of these prisons, most residing in the fifth congressional district, which by multiple measures is one of the poorest in the entire United States.²

It is a powerful and desperate context, then, that buttresses prison siting as a hopeful solution to communities in crisis. But the ‘common sense’ of prisons bringing jobs and economic growth belies a convincing body of scholarly work that suggests just the opposite.³ Despite some attempt by the state of Kentucky to begin reducing its prison population through the passage of House Bill 463, the Public Safety and Offender Accountability Act, there is a vocal and politically powerful contingent of people led by US Representative Hal Rodgers who are actively looking to site another federal prison in Appalachian Kentucky. Future research for this project will examine this plan more fully. Needless to say, research into rural prison building remains timely and needed.

Studying the culture of punishment through locations of penal tourism like The Guard’s Guesthouse might seem quaint or even irrelevant alongside critical scholarship of rural prison growth. But many Americans actually experience incarceration through its representational forms in media and culture. The Bed and Breakfast, which is housed in two building each of which served as the county jail from 1819-1987, relies heavily on this historic continuity between the site’s former and current uses. The website, for example, offers the inn as a “unique and luxurious way to ‘do time.’” The Guesthouse also emphasizes its designation as one of the top ten most haunted places in the United States. That is, the penal tourism that the inn enjoys constructs a cultural life out of the lives imprisoned and lost at the jail and gallows. Raising these ghosts enables people to play with the concept of incarceration from a comfortable historical distance yet
contemporary locality. Fully appreciating the cultural reaches of the prison industrial complex requires examinations of sites disconnected from its institutional formations but sutured to it nonetheless through the cultural work of its attendant logics and justifications.

Findings

Throughout the course of this research it became increasingly apparent that the scope of the ideological work of the carceral state required a lens of analysis beyond what criminology has traditionally offered. I reached into critical and cultural geography in order to pay attention to landscape: The Guard’s Guesthouse’s architecture, spatial convergences of history and present, and cultural artifacts, and Appalachia’s history of coal, the sediment of which seeps into and imbues sites of the penal present. Thinking of the violence embedded in the landscape through histories of incarceration, death, the exploitation of labor, and the continual underdevelopment of an entire region enables vantages for perceiving the ideological work that shapes narratives and structures contemporary conditions and dispositions.

The Guard’s Guesthouse largely mobilized its own carceral history as a county jail and gallows to imbue guests’ experiences with fleeting indicators of incarceration: old steel bars outside the guest rooms, old jail cell keys attached to one’s room key, references to guests as “inmates” and returning guests as “repeat offenders”, and any number of tchotchkes advertising that “I did time at The Guard’s Guesthouse.” These practices memorialize the brutality of incarceration. When one tours the old jail cells or even elects to spend the night in their “jail cell” room, the explicit suggestion is that one is stepping into a fleeting moment where history collapses into the present.
But the memorialization is nonetheless active in the cultural work it performs. The back building of *The Guard’s Guesthouse* remains largely untouched from its days as the county jail. Four cold, bare cells display memorabilia from its former carceral usage. In one cell, with two bunk beds, a display sits on a top bunk that contains various “home-made” items, including weapons, a tattoo gun, and a shaving cream canister carved out in order to fashion a key. Above this display sits a sign that reads, “Examples of how the criminal mind works. These devices were found in the cells.” The signage is clearly important. First, it encodes certain bio-pathological constructs about criminality as the accompanying narrative for tourists to apply to their tour of the jail and their reflection on its former inhabitants. But the present tense of the sign, combined with the paraphernalia, violates the memorialization found elsewhere in the *Guesthouse* and permanently folds the historical into the present.

*The Guard’s Guesthouse* conspicuously avoids any discussions of the contemporary projects of incarceration that surround it in the form of county jails, state, federal and private prisons. In this way, the inn makes visible the bricks and mortar continuity between its carceral past and its penal tourist present only insofar as it structures both the historical and contemporary gazes with which its tourist inmates can experience incarceration. I argue that the prison industrial complex performs crucial cultural work outside of its institutional formations, structuring the very (limited) choices and frameworks available for how to see and experience it.

In Appalachia, one community in which I conducted research, which I call Valley View, is instructive for understanding the larger findings of this project. Valley View’s private prison—deserted of prisoners and guards following legislative reform in 2011—
takes the literal and figurative place of a prior industry that both shaped and abandoned the community: coal. The actual land on which the prison now sits empty tells much of the story of Valley View. The road into the prison is a short but steep and curvy drive up from the community’s main street. The road cuts a wide swath in a range of mountains that separates the ‘holler’ in which Valley View sits from the next one over. The prison perches above the town, literally casting it in its shadow, and demonstrates the intimate connection between the community and the space. Before the prison company built the facility in the early 1990s, it was a coal ash dumpsite. Before that, it was a mining site and before that it was just another mountain in the chain that forms Valley View’s eastern perimeter. This historical lineage—from mountain to industry, from industry to industrial waste, from industrial waste to new industry, and from new industry to industrial abandonment—illustrates central features of the relationship between capital and place.

First, the small community appears to be a prime example of what Neil Smith calls the ‘seesaw movement of capital.’ The departures and arrivals of capital have structured Valley View’s constant state of both dependency on foreign capital and proneness to taking whatever form in which that capital comes (back). Second, these iterations of capital investment and divestment produce conditions and products that materially and symbolically leach into the land and form layers of sediment that seep into the body and soul of the community: the extreme health hazards of living near coal ash, the potential violence of prison work, and yet the deep-seated identities that both industries structure.

The coal seam still visible in the walls that surround the prison denotes more than local industrial history and a transcendent cultural identity; through a particular vantage,
the seam knits together the prison and coal through the overlap in their workforce, through their arrangement of space, through their lasting imprint on the communities in which they reside, and through the logics they assemble and articulate to justify the exploitation on which they rely.

It is only through paying attention to the ideology of landscape—the "particular means of organizing and experiencing the visual order of those things on the land"—that new vantages can be enabled. The Appalachian prison landscape performs important work, simultaneously erasing the relations of production that produced it while also aestheticizing the work through the authorial narrative that tells Appalachian residents to take pride in their coal past and in their prison future. Mapping this temporal relationship between coal and prison onto space through a vantage that can include the ‘politics of verticality’ employed by the state and by industry requires thinking and photographing along a three dimensional plane. Thus, we can examine the coal/carceral landscape horizontally (the effects of prisons on the Main Street’s of communities like Valley View), vertically (the prisons built on top of mountains; the underground mines) and with various layers of depth (the outsides of prisons and mines and the various interiors that contain increasingly ‘dirty’ work and constrained bodies and vantages). Such an approach enables a richer sense of mass incarceration’s presence than the narrow ocular logics we traditionally employ. Ultimately, it is the work of a ‘counter-visual’ scholarship to craft visual and analytical vantages that can better ‘see’ the prison with historical, spatial, and political-economic acuity.

Next Steps

Much of the work I detail above is expanded upon in an article commissioned for
a special edition of *Theoretical Criminology* focused on visual criminology and forthcoming in 2014. If this past year was characterized by examinations into the history and ideology that structure the “common sense” of carceral landscapes, this coming year my research will shift focus to the carceral *potential* of landscape. Specifically, with 600 acres in rural Letcher County being actively pursued for a new federal prison, there is a rich opening for scholarly examinations of the prison siting process, the ways that neoliberal and carceral ideology structure the ways people view open space through certain discourses of prison growth, and the potential of local communities to craft counter-narratives and resist.
Valley View from the Prison
Abandoned Prison in Valley View
Old Entrance to the Mine in Valley View
1 See http://www.pewtrusts.org/news_room_detail.aspx?id=60365


See, for example, [http://content.sierraclub.org/coal/disposal-ash-waste](http://content.sierraclub.org/coal/disposal-ash-waste)
