

Carceral Contours of the Commonwealth Representations of Mass Incarceration in Kentucky

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Introduction

Kentucky bears a dubious distinction as having one of the fastest growing prison systems in a country that already suffers the mark of being the global leader in incarceration in both sheer numbers and per capita rates. According to a press release from Kentucky Governor Steve Beshear's office in August 2010 announcing the state's partnership with the Pew Center on the States, Kentucky's incarcerated population grew by 442% (from 3,723 prisoners in 1980 to 20,200 in 2010) during roughly the same 30-year period in which the United States became known for its "prison industrial complex." The press release also noted that, "Kentucky has seen one of the nation's fastest growths since 2000, growing 45 percent since then, compared to 13 percent for the U.S. state prison system overall...To pay for this increase, total state spending on corrections in FY 2009 reached \$513 million, up from \$117 million in FY 1989."¹ Kentucky, it would seem, is a prime example of what Simon (2010) has aptly called "punishment consumption."

Given the dramatic rise of mass incarceration in the state and nation, curiously little research has examined how communities relate to and through such powerful carceral trends. Through a School of Justice Studies research grant, I have begun work examining the material and symbolic representations of incarceration in Kentucky. This

¹ <http://governor.ky.gov/pressrelease.htm?PostingGUID={58C7A7ED-7AE3-4E7D-8BB4-AFF4FAD30CAB}>

research, while in its infancy, has already led me in fascinating directions: a Bed and Breakfast constructed on and in an old county jail and gallows and haunted by the ghosts of its former prisoners; Appalachian mountain towns hit hard by both the departure of capital and natural disaster and yet sporting multi-million dollar new prisons; and online and print media that purport to show the faces of crime in the eastern part of the state.

This examination has produced the perspective, borrowed from cultural geography, that mass incarceration is a phenomenon that is both work—as in a set of material and symbolic products shaped by various relations of production—and is something that *performs* work—as in an active and dynamic set of logics and practices that inscribe themselves in public and private bodies. This research has suggested the importance of continued work, particularly around the project of excavating and *making visible* the work performed to and by mass incarceration. I hope to follow up this year's research with continued ethnographic engagement in Kentucky, including partnering with a photographer to add a visual layer of both examination and analysis.

Methods

Given the preliminary nature of this research, my methods have been exploratory. I have spent time experiencing my research sites, had initial conversations with relevant individuals, taken some photographs, read primary and secondary sources, and considered thematic overlaps between seemingly disparate components of mass incarceration's cultural work.

Importance and Relevance

There is little ethnographic work that examines the rise of mass incarceration and the spaces that prisons and jails have taken in our cultural, political-economic, and

geographical landscapes. There is no scholarship engaging in this inquiry in Kentucky, where rural farms, industry, and populations continue to decline while prisons rise, at times on the literal ground on which farms once stood. A Lexington *Herald-Leader* story from March 2011 confirms that, “The only county in the eastern end of the state that grew more than 10 percent [in the first decade of the 2000’s] was Elliott, but that was because the state opened a prison there in 2005. The 1,000-plus inmates at Little Sandy Correctional Complex accounted for all the county’s growth.” During the course of this research, while parked in front of Little Sandy, a correctional officer confirmed that the facility was built on top of a farm. Examining phenomena such as these raise crucial questions about capital departure and carceral growth under neoliberal capitalism.ⁱ

Findings

While it is early to discuss any concrete findings based on this research, my time in the field has been instructive for a deeper, historicized, and nuanced understanding of the work that mass incarceration has performed in this country. For example, my time at Jailers Inn supports the contention of other scholars that the swirling logics and vocabularies of mass incarceration can infuse seemingly distinct areas of life, such as high-end tourism (Brown, 2009). The Bed and Breakfast is, of course, located on and in an old jail. But carceral themes imbue every aspect of one’s visit, from the histories of each room (former cells), to the location and accompanying narrative of complimentary breakfast (in the bucolic courtyard overlooking the former site of the gallows), to the documented ‘presence’ of ghosts haunting the building, to the very interactions with the Inn’s proprietor (who shows you to your ‘cell,’ cracks ‘gallows humor’ jokes, and refers to returning visitors as his ‘repeat offenders.’) Such distinct traces of incarceration in the

realms of leisure and travel illuminate the cultural work performed by racialized state punishment.

My time exploring prison towns in Appalachia has also proved informative. Certainly the most emotional moment of the research occurred on Main Street in West Liberty, where I stared at and photographed complete decimation of residential and commercial buildings due to a March 2nd, 2012 tornado. Down the road a mile and half in one direction and 20 miles in the other stand two multi million dollar prisons, including Little Sandy, the state's newest (built in 2005) and most technologically sophisticated. The contrast between the humming fortress-like seeming invincibility of incarceration and the emptied out decimation of the proverbial and literal Main Street raise layers of questions about poverty, priorities, and tax dollars; about the physical and symbolic place of incarceration in the rural landscape; and about the role of the state and capital in structuring the future of communities.

Finally, the numerous tabloid publications showing the faces of crime in the state, with names such as *Jailed* and *Just Busted*, and available at gas stations, tobacco shops, Wal-Mart's and online, contribute to a racialized and classed pathological construction of criminality. Various pages within these publications have titles such as 'Mommy Morons'; 'Bath Salts and People Eating Each Other'; and 'Local Jail Birds'. The publications are most notable, however, for the mug shot-like photographs of arrestees that appear throughout. The message and its method of production are clear: these are the criminals and there is photographic evidence to prove as much. Indeed, in the publication called *The Jail Report*, the subtitle of the website is 'Fighting Crime Through Knowledge.' Photos of arrestees enact *knowledge* about crime. For artist and cultural

critic Allan Sekula (1986), these images might confirm the staying power of the 19th century “new juridical realism” and the instrumental potential of photography to enact “a silence that silences” through the contest between the univocal, essential, truthful image and the perceived duplicity and multiplicity of the criminal. Criminologist Katherine Biber (2007: 5) has similarly observed that legal images ‘purport to tell the truth...[and constitute] evidence.’ For Judith Butler (1993: 16), writing of the Rodney King trials, what is seen through images “is always already in part a question of what a certain racist episteme produces as the visible.” In the case of eastern Kentucky crime tabloids, visual representation seems to affix epistemic certainty to the lumpen and criminal characteristics of those profiled.

Next Steps

Initial findings from this research will be published in an article for a special edition of the journal *Theoretical Criminology* that examines visual criminology. In addition, I will be presenting on this research at two different academic conferences during the 2012-13 year including at the American Society of Criminology meetings.

As I have indicated, the preliminary research funded by the 2011/2012 School of Justice Studies grant has already led to exciting developments. In beginning to collaborate with artist and Georgia State University professor of photography Jill Frank, my hope and intention is that this preliminary research transitions into a photo-ethnography. In the Bed and Breakfast haunted by its former imprisoned inhabitants; in the decimated buildings on Main Street, the deceased farm, and the other migrations of industry obscured by the presence of mass incarceration; and in the presentation of eastern Kentucky ‘criminals’ found in various tabloids, are crucially important signs for a

critical and visual ethnography attuned to see that which is not ‘there’: the ghosts of racialized regimes past and the trans-historical and trans-local circulation of carceral logics and epistemologies that structure the contemporary empirical realities we observe, record, and analyze.ⁱⁱ

Notes

ⁱ See Gilmore (2007) and Hallsworth and Lea (2011).

ⁱⁱ On the work of haunting, see Avery Gordon (2008); for discussions of critical ethnography that can account for what often remains invisible, see Bourgois and Schonberg (2009, especially page 17) and Thomas (1993); for critical discussions about the anthropology of prisons, particularly as it relates to the discourses that support them, see Rhodes (2001). See also Sloop (1996) and Wacquant (2002)

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