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Abstract With approximately two million people detained in jails and prisons, the United States possesses the highest incarceration rate in the world. This phenomenon characterizes the “carceral state,” or the network of formal and informal institutions of punishment that have facilitated mass incarceration from the 1970s to the present. Simultaneously, former sites of incarceration were—and continue to be—reimagined as public history venues. The transformation of historic prisons into museums creates unique spaces with the ability to concurrently comment on historical and contemporary issues of crime, punishment, and incarceration. Yet, what is the social responsibility, if any, of former sites of incarceration? This paper details the rise and ongoing popularity of historic carceral tourism, and explains how, by commenting on the past and present social, cultural, and political environment, this new type of museum offers opportunities to embrace ideals of social accountability central to the “new museology.”

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After Charles Dickens visited Eastern State Penitentiary in Philadelphia in 1842, he departed with a profound sense of sadness and the conviction that solitary confinement, along with other prison conditions, was manifestly inhumane. Of his experience he wrote that, “standing at the central point, and looking down these dreary passages, the dull repose and quiet that prevails, is awful. Occasionally, there is a drowsy sound . . . but it is stifled by the thick walls and heavy dungeon-door, and only serves to make the general stillness more profound.”¹ Today, such stillness is arguably hard to come by at Eastern State Penitentiary. In 2016, approximately 240,000 visitors toured the same halls that Dickens once walked. Offering a myriad of exhibits, tours, programs, and special events, Eastern State Penitentiary is one of several former sites of incarceration reimagined as a public historical venue.²

Historic Prison Museums

Historic prison museums represent a subset of “prison public history.”³ While interpretation occurs at other carceral sites, including those accessible to the public (Cell Block 7 Museum at the State Prison of Southern Michigan) or off-site museums about prisons (the Angola Museum at Louisiana State Penitentiary), the historic prison museum is arguably the most recognizable—and popular—version of *prison tourism* or *penal tourism*.⁴ But, what

responsibilities do historic prison museums possess in the current social and political environment? This article suggests that historic prison museums have the potential to implement tenets of the “new museology” in order to create a “usable past,” despite the fact that they frequently do not. Instead, visitors often encounter deeply historicized interpretation at these former sites of incarceration, despite their relatively recent decommissions as operational prisons, which undermines their ability to engage with the current carceral state.⁵

Historiography

Historic prison museums occupy a unique, if somewhat unorthodox, position within public history, operating at an intersection of various disciplines, histories, and identities. Former sites of incarceration are frequently analyzed using the framework of “dark tourism,” (also known as thanatourism), defined as “the phenomenon which encompasses the presentation and consumption (by visitors) of real and commodified death and disaster sites.”⁶ Historic prison museums have also been featured in the field of museum studies, which is especially important, considering that both prisons and museums have operated as “modern” social and educational institutions on behalf of the state, and actively contribute to definitions and understandings of nation-building and citizenship.⁷ Lastly, scholarship on the rise and development of the carceral state has yet to adequately address historic prison museums, but offers a useful historiographical context for the creation and promulgation of both prisons and prison museums.⁸ Scholarship on the carceral state also helps to reveal the urgency of the current carceral crisis, and often emphasizes the need for contemporary action—a remedy that historic prison museums are poised to provide.⁹

Origins

How did historic prison museums come to be? Beginning in the 1970s, the War on Drugs and “law and order” political rhetoric led to punitive public policy that swelled prison populations with disproportionate numbers of racial minorities comprising those incarcerated.¹⁰ In operation since the nineteenth century, many former prisons became inadequate to accommodate the victims of “the punitive turn.”¹¹ In order to accommodate increasing numbers of those imprisoned, state and federal governments built modern and spacious facilities, decommissioning older state and federal prisons across the country. Geographers Jennifer Turner and Kimberley Peters contend that these buildings were “rendered obsolete and unfit for use, owing to architectural degradation and the cost of maintenance.”¹² According to criminologists Carolyn Strange and Michael Kempa, because “the late-20th-century prison industry rendered obsolete prisons erected during the 19th-century penal building boom, decommissioned buildings have [since] been turned to new uses.”¹³

As prisons were decommissioned, heated debate arose regarding their fates, especially as communities considered opportunities for “carceral retasking,” including commercial or recreational developments.¹⁴ Sociologist Michelle Brown contends that states struggled to repurpose the sites, as “they couldn’t afford to demolish [or remodel them.]”¹⁵ Many sites were decommissioned between the 1970s and 1990s, including the Old Idaho State Penitentiary in Boise, Idaho (active from 1872 to 1973), the Old Montana State Prison Museum in Deer Lodge, Montana (1871 to 1979), the West Virginia Penitentiary in Moundsville, West Virginia (1863 to 1995), the Missouri State Penitentiary in Jefferson City,

Missouri (1836 to 2004), and the Ohio State Reformatory in Mansfield, Ohio (1886 to 1990). Recognized as sites with educational, economic, and entertainment value, these former prisons emerged as museums primarily between 1961 and 2010, with noticeable growth occurring after 1970.¹⁶ According to criminologist Jeffrey Ian Ross, there are currently 95 prison museums operating across the globe.¹⁷ Apparently, “(p)risons museums can be found in almost every state” in the United States, although fewer institutions exist in the South.¹⁸ And the museumification of these sites is far from concluded- in fact, Morin cites estimates that there “are roughly three-dozen such prison heritage tourist sites throughout the US, with more planned.”¹⁹

The New Museology

As mass incarceration accelerated during the 1970s and 1980s, the “new museology” emerged within museum discourse, ideology, and practice at the same time.²⁰ According to museologist Pierre Mayrand, “The cause [of the movement] must lie in the museum establishment’s delay in coming to terms with a number of contemporary, cultural, social and political developments.”²¹ In 1984, scholars believed that the new museology and its basic principles “merely reaffirms the social mission of the museum as a new point of departure and the primacy of this function over the traditional museum functions: conservation, buildings, objects, and the public.”²² Thus, the “new museology” advocates profound changes in the thinking and attitudes of the museologist.²³

The “new museology” also invokes the utility of history, or the notion of the “usable past,” which geographers Karen M. Morin and Dominique Moran suggest emerged “as a response and challenge to top-down, master narratives and foundational myths primarily surrounding nation-building.”²⁴ Sociologist Jeffrey Olick maintains that a usable past is thus “an invention or at least a retrospective reconstruction [of historical referents] to serve the needs of the present.”²⁵ Arguably, the “usable past” urged museums—and museum professionals—to be more self-reflective and socially relevant by prioritizing community engagement, visitor diversification, and stakeholder involvement.²⁶ This theoretical impulse continues to undergird much of contemporary public history practice, and has contributed to (re)defining the social, political, and cultural role of museums.

Historic prison museums are the perfect venues to implement the “new museology” in order to create a “usable past” by utilizing their sites to comment on carceral histories and confront the contemporary realities—and implications—of mass incarceration.²⁷ With millions of annual visitors, former sites of incarceration possess exceptional potential to comment simultaneously on historical and contemporary social issues. Morin contemplates “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...continue the project of progressive social transformation.”²⁸ Otherwise, the lack of “a usable carceral past” threatens to undermine the educational and ethical imperatives of museums, specifically historic prison museums, as well as new museological principles more generally.

Missed Opportunities

Unfortunately, many scholars have accused historic prison museums of producing a distancing effect between visitors and subject matter through “penal spectatorship,” or a “prison voyeurism” that “fails to contextualize the myths, representations, and stereotypes of prison life rather than clarifying or explaining them.”²⁹ Commodification within such historic sites, then, refers not merely to financial profitability but methods of “selling the prison experience” by idealizing or exoticizing the carceral experience so that the general public consumes prison histories as entertainment, recreation, or “edutainment.”³⁰ By staging authenticity and mediating interpretation, prison voyeurism distances visitors from carceral realities, consequently diminishing society’s ability—and desire—to engage in prison reform. In this way, historic prison museums often fail to embrace their full civic potential or provoke visitors to consider their own memories and histories in a more civic-oriented or nationally contextualized way.

In order to address both the carceral history of the United States and the contemporary carceral state, historic prison museums must reflect on the extent to which their interpretation idealizes or exoticizes the carceral experience, and whether or not they engage with contemporary issues of mass incarceration. For example, interpretation at Alcatraz Island in San Francisco, California in May 2016 focused on incarceration during the 1920s and 1930s, or the “Gangster Era,” featuring sensationalized aspects of the carceral experience like escape attempts, excessive violence, and the tenure of infamous inmates. More socially critical issues, like prisoner rights, forced labor, prison riots, and contemporary conditions of incarceration garnered little attention. The voyeuristic aesthetic has been implemented at similar sites such as Missouri State Prison (“the bloodiest 47 acres in America”) and the West Virginia Penitentiary (“where history meets mystery”). By associating incarceration exclusively with the past, commodifying the prison experience, and representing historic carceral tourism as a form of entertainment/amusement, historic prison museums diminish the harsh realities and human costs of imprisonment.³¹ In so doing, they give permission to visitors to dismiss the social problems associated with contemporary incarceration. Avoiding dialogue with current carceral practices and failing to contextualize historic prison sites within the historical narrative of crime, punishment, and power, means that historic prison museums risk failing the mission of the new museology.

The solution is not necessarily to close or destroy former sites of incarceration. According to Strange and Kempa, “The murkiest project of all would be to close them to tourists rather than to confront the ongoing challenge of interpreting incarceration, punishment, and forced isolation.”³² The Alabama State Penitentiary (1842 to 1942), also known as the Wetumpka State Penitentiary or “The Walls of Alabama,” serves as an example of how a historic prison museum could have commented on current carceral trends and realities. In their 1973 National Register of Historic Places nomination form, the petitioners explained that, “the Elmore Historical Society plans to obtain the property and restore the remaining structures for use as offices and a museum.”³³ Unfortunately, this vision failed to materialize, and according to the current Alabama Department of Corrections, only “one decayed building of the old prison remains today in Wetumpka.”³⁴

It would be in error to dismiss the fate of Wetumpka State Prison as inconsequential; upon closer examination, the benefit of “museumifying” the former Alabama State Penitentiary becomes apparent. Wetumpka’s history speaks to considerations of race and gender within Alabama’s correctional history: it was co-correctional, with male and female inmates segregated by both race and gender. The original facility closed in the early 1940s after the Wetumpka inmates completed construction of the nearby Julia Tutwiler Prison for Women, which remains operational today. In 2003, a judge declared that the facility’s conditions violated the U.S. Constitution, and in 2012 the Equal Justice Initiative submitted a formal complaint to the U.S. Department of Justice citing rampant officer-on-inmate sexual abuse.³⁵ Thus, the squandered opportunity to convert the Wetumpka Prison into a historic prison museum with a narrative that connected it to the violence of gendered and racial interactions resulted in a form of historical erasure and disconnect between past and present.

The fact that historic prison museums possess the potential—and arguably the responsibility—to confront the contemporary carceral crisis, and yet do not, demonstrates that “prison public history” has yet to fully integrate new museological practices. And yet, mass incarceration in the United States demands the historical, social, and civic attention of these former sites of imprisonment. Until historic prison museums bridge the distance between past and present, the promise of the new museology will remain unfulfilled.

Small Victories

Few historic prison museums have eagerly—and successfully—embraced critical, contemporary interpretation; however, Eastern State Penitentiary’s attempt at implementing a new museological approach might serve as an example for other institutions. According to Brown, the interpretive approach at Eastern State Penitentiary “is unusual in its ability and commitment to creating a context in which visitors are challenged to think through their understandings of prison life at various moments in tour structures.”³⁶ For instance, their new exhibit *Prisons Today: Questions in the Age of Mass Incarceration*, “elicits personal connections to recent historic changes in the U.S. criminal justice system, encourages reflection, supports dialogue, and suggests steps that visitors can take to help shape the evolution of the American criminal justice system moving forward.”³⁷ This professed mission mirrors the tenets and principles of the new museology, signifying a deliberate attempt to complicate traditional carceral interpretation. However, according to Bruggeman, creating “lively civic debate around current correctional policy” will “require more.”³⁸ Specifically, introducing audiences to concepts and questions regarding historical and contemporary imprisonment—and the relationship between the past and present—demands more sustained and coordinated efforts within and between institutions.

Recommendations

Scholars, including historians Heather Ann Thompson and Seth Bruggeman, proclaim that the “time has come for historians to confront mass incarceration.”³⁹ But, the question of “how” remains – especially for historic prison museums. Ross argues that museum professionals should offer “higher engagement activities” at these sites.⁴⁰ Criminologist Alana Barton and sociologist Alyson Brown call for an “‘inclusive integrity’ on the part of state agencies, other

stakeholders *and* the viewing public,” as well as the embrace of a more nuanced understanding of perspective.⁴¹ Tourism experts Crispin Dale and Neil Robinson suggest that, in an effort to balance the various institutional interests, “acceptability, suitability, and ethics of display” should be considered.⁴² Bearing these and other critiques in mind, preliminary recommendations for historic prison museums, based upon aspects of the new museology, include the need to:

- *Embrace nuanced narrative.* It is imperative for former sites of incarceration to move away from stereotypical imagery, language, and branding that reinforces popular carceral representations that do not reflect either the historical or lived experience. Until audiences are presented with diverse content, themes, perspectives, and stories, their stereotypical understandings of carceral spaces—and incarcerated persons and processes—will go unchallenged.
- *Cultivate inclusive relationships.* Some historic prison museums already engage and collaborate with stakeholders, but often these individuals or groups possess an administrative or correctional perspective. Less represented are the lived experiences, memories, and participation of inmates or communities most affected by mass incarceration, in either the past or present. Thus, institutions would increase both their relevance and their legitimacy by prioritizing diversity, in their interpretation, their programming, and their viewership.⁴³
- *Make contemporary connections.* The interpretation at historic prison museums often distances visitors from engagement with the current carceral climate because the subjects, themes, and spaces are portrayed as relics of the distant past. Instead, historic prison museums should remember Freeman Tilden’s aphorism: “The chief aim of Interpretation is not instruction, but provocation.”⁴⁴ Without a “usable past,” the potential of historic prison museums will continue to go unrealized.
- *Contextualize the site and story.* Historic prison museums should utilize their site-specific “power of place” not only to create an institutional story, but also to contextualize content and context within a larger narrative/framework.⁴⁵ Until institutions move beyond their isolated institutional identities, and instead, work to create a network- “prison public history” will remain a fragmented field.

The aforementioned recommendations are by no means exhaustive. Rather, they offer a point of departure for fresh conversation about the place and practice of the new museology in historic prison museums. Additional research and discussion—addressing ideological, methodological, and pragmatic concerns—must persist.

Historic prison museums represent the merger of two distinct institutions, that of the prison and of the museum. Building on the legacies of these different, but related, establishments, former sites of incarceration that now operate as public history venues must fully recognize the potential and responsibility of their position in the current social, cultural, and political environment. Given the increased nature of penalty in the United States, as well as the rise and continuation of the carceral state, the stakes are simply too high for historic prison museums to remain immobilized. The new museology reimagined the function of the

museum; the advent of historic prison museums reinvented its form. Now, public historians and museum professionals must reconsider and reconceive interpretation at historic prison museums in order to meet the challenges, and fulfill the promise, of the new museology.

Notes

¹ Charles Dickens, *American Notes for General Circulation* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1850), 81-93.

² Julie Courtney and Todd Gilens, eds., *Prison Sentences: The Prison as Site/The Prison as Subject* (Philadelphia, PA: Moore College of Art and Design, 1995).

³ Clarence Jefferson Hall, Jr., facilitator, "Doing Prison Public History: Examples and Challenges," (session at the 2017 Annual Meeting of the National Council on Public History, The Westin Indianapolis, Indianapolis, IN, April 20, 2017), <http://ncph.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/2017-Annual-Meeting-Program-web.pdf>.

⁴ Michael Welch, *Escape to Prison: Penal Tourism and the Pull of Punishment* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2015).

⁵ Michelle Brown, *The Culture of Punishment: Prison, Society, and Spectacle* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2009).

⁶ Derek Dalton, *Dark Tourism and Crime* (London and New York, NY: Routledge, 2015); Malcolm Foley and J. John Lennon, *Dark Tourism: The Attraction of Death and Disaster* (London: Continuum, 2000); Chris Rojek, *Ways of Escape: Modern Transformations in Leisure and Travel* (London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 1993); Tony Seaton, "Guided by the Dark: From Thanatopsis to Thanatourism," *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 2 (1996): 234-244; Leanne White and Elspeth Frew, *Dark Tourism and Place: Managing and Interpreting Dark Places* (London and New York, NY: Routledge, 2013).

⁷ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London and New York, NY: Verso, 1983); Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics* (London and New York, NY: Routledge, 1995); Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 1977).

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⁹ Kelly Lytle Hernandez, Khalil Gibran Muhammad, and Heather Ann Thompson, eds. "Historians and the Carceral State," Special Issue, *The Journal of American History* 102, no. 1 (June 2015); Heather Ann Thompson, "From Research the Past to Reimagining the Future: Locating Carceral Crisis, and the Key to its End, in the Long 20th Century," in *The Punitive Turn: Race, Prisons, Justice, and Inequality*, ed. by Deborah E. McDowell, Claudrena N. Harold, and Juan Battle (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2013).

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- ²² *Ibid.*
- ²³ *Ibid.*
- ²⁴ Morin and Moran, *Historical Geographies of Prisons*, 6; Morin, "Carceral Space and the Usable Past," 4.
- ²⁵ Jeffrey Olick, "From Usable Past to the Return of the Repressed," *The Hedgehog Review* (Summer 2007): 19.
- ²⁶ Gail Anderson, ed., *Reinventing the Museum: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives on the Paradigm Shift* (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2004); Elaine Gurian, "Survey of the Field," *Museums & Social Issues: A Journal of Reflective Discourse* 6, no. 2 (2011): 147-149; Brenda Trofanenko and Avner Segall, eds., *Beyond Pedagogy: Reconsidering the Public Purpose of Museums* (Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2014).
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