Discarded People, Discarded Spaces, and Washington, DC’s Criminal Justice Infrastructure
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Exploring the ghost landscapes of a revitalized capital city
In the 2000s, Washington, DC incarcerated nearly 2% of its population, far more than the U.S. average. The city, lacking a prison system of its own, sends its felons into Federal Bureau of Prisons (BOP) facilities, as far away as Texas or California, often to rural areas suffering from losses of industrial jobs.

At the same time, the city was in the midst of a building boom in several neglected areas of the city. The results of that boom are easily visible today to anyone who walks the streets in places like Navy Yard, NoMa, or Shaw. The research questions guiding this project are:
1) How closely do spatial patterns of incarceration overlap with patterns of redevelopment in urban neighborhoods?
2) Where are the prisons housing DC’s exported residents, and what can those places tell us about the transformation of urban space?

Washington, DC
Patterns of incarceration & neighborhood change, 1999-2015

Methodology:
1) Field research based on personal observations in Washington, DC and sites of six Appalachian prisons
2) Spatial and mapping analysis based on data from DC Department of Corrections and DC Department of Consumer and Regulatory Affairs
3) Secondary scholarship (see partial list below)

Key Concepts & Sources:
1) William Cronon, "Ghost landscapes" (1991)
2) Eric Cadora & Laura Kurgan, "Million Dollar Blocks" (2009)
3) Henri Lefebvre, "Space is political" (1971)
5) Harvey Molotch, "The city as growth machine" (1976)
6) Tracy Huling, "Building a Prison Economy in Rural America" (2002)
7) Don Bраман, "Doing Time on the Outside" (2007)
8) 1997 National Capital Revitalization Act

Findings:
1) Incarceration boom and economic redevelopment are linked, both in DC and in rural prison hinterlands.
2) Patterns of incarceration mirror patterns of environmental degradation.
3) Resultant transformation comes with hidden social/environmental costs.
4) Data regarding prisons and prison system is difficult to access.

DC’s prison infrastructure
Federal BOP facilities housing DC inmates
By 2015, nearly 6,000 DC residents were serving time in BOP prisons all over the country. In August 2016, the author visited the site of six of these prisons in West Virginia and Kentucky.

[The prison economy] “can change the face of our region for generations to come.”
Kentucky Congressman Hal Rogers, 1998

Residences of male prisoners, 1999 = 1 prisoner
Washington, DC
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In particular neighborhoods, the incarceration rate reached 10% or higher. Many of these same areas witnessed a building boom that displaced old landscapes and populations (left).

“Once somebody is arrested and convicted, they’re gone. Nobody...cares about them. In many ways, the prison system [is] sort of in the dark.”
David Keene, in Ava Duvernay’s 13th

1 in 50 DC residents behind bars, 2007

“I’m better here now...but we can’t stay. The poor people, the Spanish people, who cares?”
Brisa Cruz, 40, Columbia Heights

Zach was born and raised in Washington, DC, and has family in southern West Virginia. He will be continuing this research in 2017 and can be reached at zaz2001@columbia.edu.

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