

DIGITAL SING SING: SPECTERS OF THE INCARCERATED

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In July 2014, the New York State Archives and Ancestry.com announced that prison records from New York State penitentiaries would be digitized, on line, and accessible through the Ancestry portal. New York residents whose tax dollars historically underwrote the State Archives would have free access.¹ Ancestry.com embraced the idea and offered the public a chance to uncover any suspected “Black Sheep” hidden in family histories. Scholarly research was a secondary consequence of the arrangement.²

My imagination was intrigued by this announcement given the inclusion of the Sing Sing Prison Admission Registers for the years 1865 to 1939. Painful memories of my earlier research with these five hundred page tomes recalled the struggles with these unwieldy sources. In 1999 I worked with the town of Ossining on the first Sing Sing Prison museum proposal and considered ways to incorporate the Registers into the exhibit.

How could I map these newly digitized hand records to deepen the history of Sing Sing Sing prison and expand my understanding of penal history and provide a more nuanced view of punishment?

Sing Sing’s reputation as a place of dread and terror, the American Bastille, the Big House was deeply embedded in America’s popular culture and in the public imagination. Its image had become a cultural script which with the aid of newspapers, novels and theater created a stereotypical image of Sing Sing’s prisoners.

Urbanization and industrialization transformed the mid-century city into two spheres—the money aristocracy and the dangerous poor. *Harpers* described New York once “a decent and orderly town now a barbarous metropolis—a noirish city.”³ New York was divided into light and darkness, shadow and sunlight—confronting a well organized underworld centered in the “free for all” Five Points. This vision of the underworld morphed into the idea of the “the criminal class.”

French historians, Dominique Kalifa and Marie Christine Leps, uncovered the origins of the concept of the criminal class.⁴ Kalifa writes about the moral miasmas, the odors, and animality

¹ Roberts, Sam. 2014. *Archives From Prisons In New York Are Digitized*. July 6. The New York Times. July 6. <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/07/newyorkregion/new-york-prison>.

² “New Sources” *Ancestry.com* (blog), July 8, 2014.

³ Edwin G. Burrows and Michael Wallace. 1999. *A History of New York City To 1898*. Oxford: New York. 697-700

⁴ Dominique Kalifa. *Vice, Crime, and Poverty*. 2019. Columbia: New York. *Christine Leps, Apprehending the Criminal: the Production of Deviance in Nineteenth Century Discourse*. 1992. Duke University Press: North Carolina

terms used to describe the underworld of the “dangerous class.” Leps describes the production of deviance through the popular media and how the emerging discourse quickly became hegemonic. The development of the concept of the criminal class was an essential element in the new science of criminology and the construction of the criminal type.⁵

Postmodern notions of historical scholarship challenged the archive’s claim as a source for an absolute truth. Archivists had long resisted theoretical exploration of their role as keepers of the records and arbiters of historical truth. A recent re-evaluation of the place of the archive has not only provided a critique of their practice but offered new approaches.

The archive has been described as a memory palace or storage temple serving the disciplinary needs of the state.⁶ Originating in the bureaucratic impulses of the modern state they provide tools for maintaining the social order. These monuments to the past were conceived as fixed and part of the process of forgetting. James O’Toole’s 1993 suggestion, that the archive might instead serve as a symbolic function and he suggested we distinguish between record-making and the subject of the record fell on deaf ears.⁷

Digitization of the Archives proved a catalyst for reevaluating these sources as interactive and a fluid part of the public sphere.⁸ The new digital tools were indispensable to the mining of knowledge and the peeling away of the source.⁹ Digital archives were by their nature always becoming, generating new stories as they are activated and reimagined by their users. They introduced us to those marginal groups who had been silenced but could now speak through the archives.¹⁰

These recoverable fragments of knowledge provide elements of a biographical narrative.¹¹ Traces of individual lives encouraged researchers to speculate which in turn enabled the ghosts of the archive to speak. They were indeed phantoms of remembrance. As Derrida concluded “We must speak to the ghost.”¹²

⁵ Audrey Herschel, Review of “Apprehending the Criminal: The Production of Deviance in Nineteenth Century Discourse.” *Victorian Review*. 1994 20: 86-89

⁶ Eric Ketelaar. 2002. “Archival Temples, Archival Prisons: Modes of Power and Production.” *Archival Science* 2: 233

Knut Ove Eliassen. “Archives of Michel Foucault” *Academia*

⁷ James M. O’Toole. 1993. “The Symbolic Significance of Archives.” *American Archivist* 56: 234-255

⁸ Eric Ketelaar, 2003. “Being Digital in People’s Archives.” *Archives and Manuscripts* 31: 8-9

⁹ Greengrass, Mark. and Hughes, Lorna Hughes. 2017. *The Virtual Representation of the Past*. London: Routledge. 66

Ketelaar. 2002. “Being Digital” 8-22

¹⁰ Eric Ketelaar. 2012. “Cultivating Archives: Meanings and Identities.” *Archival Science* 12: 19-33.

¹¹ Greengrass, Mark. and Hughes, Lorna Hughes. 2017. *The Virtual Representation of the Past*. London: Routledge. 90

¹² Nesmith, Tom. 1999. “Still Fuzzy, But More Accurate: Some Thoughts on the ‘Ghosts’ of Archival Theory.” *Archivaria* 47

In 2003 the Old Bailey Proceedings of London's Central Criminal Court from 1674 to 1913, which contained detailed accounts of 197,000 trials, was digitized and provided open access.¹³ Early users, like myself, were overwhelmed and uncertain about utilizing this big data-the "dark matter of bureaucracy."¹⁴ Navigating the collection was cumbersome and required a good deal of experience to ferret out connections and locate allied sources. A group of British historians created the "Digital Panopticon Project" to enhance the Old Bailey records and link them to other digital collections creating a user friendly interface supported by a series of electronic finding aids.¹⁵ It has attracted large numbers of academic researchers and public users providing them with an "important new way to do history."¹⁶

The principal investigator, criminologist Barry Godfrey of of Liverpool University, developed the Digital Panopticon Project as a pathway to "uncover and recover" the personal histories of the disposed and powerless-the lives of the "ruined." He imagined the interest in "ruined lust" and ruined lives sharing a common sensibility, an idea that resonates with me given my preoccupation with Sing Sing's old cellblock, a verifiable ruin, and its thousands of nineteenth century occupants. Godfrey detects a common "redemptive impulse" which links the two spheres and seeks to recover ruined lives.¹⁷

Digital research, according to Godfrey, changes biographical work and creates a more liquid approach-more play for the imagination. Decaying carceral institutions are a portal into the past and provide the traces of the ruined lives-the specters of Sing Sing. Historian have in the works of E. P. Thompson a chance to rescue these lives from the "enormous condescension of posterity."¹⁸ Godfrey encourages us to to use the whole life biographical approach with its empathy for the subject, incorporating events, and social and economic policies that are the context for these stories.¹⁹

Digital Panopticon has in addition to its own digital projects, partnered with dozens of commercial and non-profit organizations, creating a kind of semantic web linking individual records in remarkable user friendly navigation. The project has provided introductions to biometrics, the ethics of digital data, how to read an Old Bailey trial, record keeping and

¹³ www.oldbaileyonline.org

¹⁴ Sarah Blakslee. 2014. "Computing Crime and Punishment." New York Times, June 17.
<https://go-gale-com.avoserv2.library.library.fordham.edu/ps/retrieve.doc>

¹⁵ www.digitalpanopticon.com

¹⁶ Blakeslee

¹⁷ Godfrey, Barry. "Liquid Crime History: Digital Entrepreneurs and the Industrial Production of Ruined Lives" in *Liquid Criminology Doing Imaginative Criminological Research*, edited by Michael Hviid Jacobsen and Sandra Walklate. 2016. New York and London: Routledge. 140-156.

¹⁸ Ibid.

The concept of liquid criminology derives from Zygmunt Bauman's *Liquid Modernity* which argues that change is the only permanent fact and we face a world of inclined to constant transformation.

¹⁹ Ibid.

reconstructed dozens of “ruined lives.” The last effort led to the publication of biographies one hundred prisoners.²⁰

New Arrivals at Sing Sing were processed on their first day with a bath, a physical examination, a haircut, a uniform and interviewed by the keeper/clerk who recorded their responses to a set of standard questions in a large leather and cloth ledger measuring 14 x 9. These annual volumes provided the statistical backbone for the annual report of the agent/warden/superintendent and were incorporated into the State’s official prison records. Eventually the annual volumes made their way to the State Archives until digitization provided an democratic access.

I felt drawn to explore more deeply, not bounded by the archive’s hours, the watchful eyes of the archivist, or the outsized 149 volumes. The digital format, with easy private access, encouraged imaginative wandering through thousands of entries. I was introduced to a broad unfiltered sampling of New York’s incarcerated and over time felt their digital specters. I lingered over the meager facts of their lives provided by the Registers as I struggled to humanize the data and reconstruct their individual identities which had been subsumed under the category of the criminal class. The effort to map this “big data”-not an uncommon predicament in criminal justice history-was complicated by the limitation of the search by name only. Unlike the Old Bailey records that found a home in the Digital Panopticon the registers stand alone a by-product or their genealogical focus.

For 150 years the format of the registers remained consistent, shaped initially by the the needs of prison administrators and state government. A critical review of the categories reveals much about theories of criminality and the hierarchy of causes. We can see in this mid-century entry the following items:

Date of admission

Alias

County Received

Age

Place of birth

Marital and family status

Complexion

Height, Weight

Hair and eye color

Scars and Tattoos

Literacy -read and write

Education

Language

Religion

Habits-temperance, drinking smoking

Occupation

²⁰ Helen Johnston, Barry Godfrey, and David J. Cox. *Victorian Convicts 100 Criminal Lives*. 2016. Pen and Sword Books: Barnsley, South Yorkshire.

Date of conviction
Sentence and judge

These formats were prefigured in 1797 at Newgate, Sing Sing's New York City predecessor, where the number of categories was smaller and the format more tabular. One line entries included nativity, age, occupation, abode, crime, complexion, hair, stature, marks, conviction sentence date. Here the primary use for the entry is identification. Note the early listing for marks, a durable concern through the next century and a potential link between the body and crime.

In the 1865 Sing Sing entry for Thomas Carroll, note the clear script, specification of residence, details of facial scars and tattoos, and the addition of religion and temperance the last two items key elements in nineteenth century theories of criminal behavior. The by-product here was a better understanding of the causes of crime and not just control or punishment.²¹ We see In the Sing Sing Registers the use of the narrative form-a kind of story telling. How is this significant and in what ways does it constitute a frame for a fuller biography?

For the sake of comparison I have included a late nineteenth century entry which has been standardized with printed items at the top and narratives at the bottom the latter showing the influence of anthropometrics. Place of arrest, tobacco use and names of relatives are new additions.

The bureaucracy of crime is fully evident and underpins the concept of the nineteenth century penitentiary as a laboratory. Did the mass of data inform any criminological studies? How was this information used and in what ways did it enhance the power of the state and operationalize the notion of criminal class?

So far, we have studied the admission registers from the standpoint of the record makers and their state objectives. But our concern is more with the subject of the records. How do we liberate the prisoner from the record keeper and enable the archive to speak.²² We need to reimagine the archive as a memory site open to digital interrogation. How might we transform the Registers into a collection of specters-and use them to create biographical portraits.

The Digital Panopticon provides a working model in their on line convict biographies which receive a fuller treatment in the publication *Victorian Convicts: 100 Lives*.²³ The individual portraits humanize the convicts, their families, their social backgrounds, living conditions and working lives. This work, of course, is informed by the web links developed by the Digital Panopticon. At present no such comparable tool exists in the United States and so we will be compelled to create some hand made links.

²¹ "The Growth of Record Keeping About Convicts" Digital Panopticon. www.digitalpanopticon.com.

²² Ketelaar, Archives 9-27

²³ Cox, David J., Godfrey, Barry., and Johnston, Helen. 2016. *Victorian Convicts: 100 Criminal Lives*. Pen And & Sword: Barnsley, South Yorkshire

James Donnelley was selected as our case study given the availability of allied digital materials including immigration records, trial transcripts, newspaper stories as well as the the admission register. I have typed the entry and highlighted the links which might enable us to see Donnelly's life in a social context.

The Register Entry

Sentence 10 years for May 1894 Manslaughter
 Arresting officer **O'Neil 20th Precinct**
 Born in **Ireland** 32 years old and a **bartender**
 Medium complexion, grey eyes and brown and grey hair
5-9 3/4, 171 pounds, read and write
Moderate habits, used tobacco
 Residence 401 **west 28th street**
Good shaped large head, 7 1/8 hat, size 11 shoes
 Hair covers the neck; four small scars on back of hand
 Small ears well back
 High round forehead
 Hair grows low over temple
 High and round forehead arched nose left, eyebrows small and sharp
 Long and full ? Lips Dimple chin very large full face
 Regulars face, full features, good teeth
Scars on ? Left forearm
 Imperfect nail right index finger ²⁴

The digital trial manuscript, "The People against James Donnelley" and news stories in the New York Times "A Sunday Saloon Tragedy" and the New York Herald, "He Says He Shot in Self-Defense" add to our understanding of the human details of the crime.²⁵

The Biographical Fragment

James Donnelley was an Irish Immigrant arriving in New York from Tyron Ireland in July of 1878. He was taken up by his New York brothers and cousins who supplied him with housing, mostly in Hell's Kitchen and employment, principally in one of the family "stores." Donnelley, single and upstanding Catholic, known to the clergy, was of good physical stature which helped

²⁴ New York Sing Sing Prison Admission Registers Dec 1892 -1894 James Donnelley, Ancestry.com/search/collections/nysingsingadmission.

Note the character of the date and the narrative illustrate the influence of Anthropometrics in late nineteenth century criminology.

²⁵ Criminal Trial Transcript Digitized 2006-2015 in Criminal Trial Transcripts of New York County Collection 1883-1927. Llyod Sealy Library, John Jay College of Criminal justice.

Lib.jjay.cuny.edu/content/criminal-trial-trasnscripts-digitized-2006-2015.1-487.

Nn

him as a bartender in the rough immigrant neighborhood of Hell's Kitchen. A loaded pistol was stored under the bar for emergencies. His patrons were fellow Irishmen and some African Americans who resided in the diverse surrounding neighborhood. The bar was a social center providing companionship and news for the young males struggling to find employment in the building trades, coal, metal, shipping, sanitation and a variety of general laboring tasks. Some had been arrested.

Returning from work and eager for entertainment they would stop for a beer, talk with friends and visit the nearby Miners Theater. The regulars ate lunch here and kept track of their changing height on an improvised wall chart. The location on Eighth Avenue and Twenty-Eight Street was in the midst of a busy commercial space and a tightly packed neighborhood.

His victim, truck driver Charles Madden also Irish, had tangled with Donnelley before in the rough tumble world of the west side saloons. He was a physically imposing 22 year old, and a heavy drinker who got "mussy" when intoxicated. Often described as quarrelsome, he bullied African American patrons, physically attacking them, and in one instance used a glass to pummel the black victim in the face. His physical attacks and abuse of African Americans was a volatile component of Donnelley's bar life. Madden often came into the bar with a bale hook and was rumored to carry a pistol. On one occasion he attacked Donnelley with a cuspidor and threatened "to do worse to him than the goddam coons."

Felix Donnelley, his boss instructed him not to serve Madden any drinks-this became the source of contention that led to the fatal shooting. On May 25 a wounded Madden crawled out the bar, collapsed, on the sidewalk, and was quickly surrounded by a large crowd. Donnelley admitted shooting Madden but in self-defense in response to the victim's gesture towards his right pocket for what he assumed was a weapon. The shooting was the culmination of a long history of verbal battling with foul language which intensified their bitter enmity. Donnelley was sentenced to ten years in Sing Sing prison.

Standing in the center of the ruin of the original cell block I want to call up the specter of James Donnelley, imagine him in the cellblock, and see him with all his flaws and failures as a human being and an individual not just a silent member of the criminal class.

I believe this reimagining is a prerequisite for honestly confronting the moral crises of mass incarceration and engaging in direct and personal ways with our practice of punishment.

The digitized Sing Sing Admission Registers will allow us to disturb the established paradigms of crime and punishment and let the silent speak.²⁶

²⁶ Some undergraduates have used the Digitized Registers as principal sources for their class projects. See "Resurrecting the Ethnic Village" <http://www.nyirish.net/ethnicvillage/sing-sing-prison-1870/> studied 85 Irish New York City inmates and "The NYC Criminal" <http://www.nycriminal.ace.fordham.edu> which mapped the lives of one thousand inmates between 1865 and 1915. Both projects created informative collective portraits of a sampling of the Sing Sing population.