

## **Don't Mess With Texas: stories of punishment from Lone Star museums**

Hannah Thurston

Stories about crime continue to captivate and titillate audiences all over the world. From fictional accounts of notorious gangsters to the biographies of real-life serial killers, suicide bombers and sex offenders, criminals and their crimes both terrify and fascinate us in equal measure (Jewkes 2011). Similarly, the punishment of offenders is big business in the culture industry. Prison movies have always been a sub-genre of the crime film, but in more recent years we have also seen the proliferation of prison and death row documentaries, each promising to show us the hidden realities of life behind bars (see Cecil and Leitner 2009; Surette 2011). It is thus now widely accepted that punishment not only exists within the prison cell or execution chamber, but it also thrives in books, websites, stage plays and Hollywood blockbusters; in its (re)presentations (Brown 2009; Smith 2008).

However, while certain representational formats have received much attention from punishment scholars (namely film and news media), others – such as punishment museums and prison tours – have gone somewhat unnoticed until recent years. We are only now beginning to see the systematic analysis of penal tourist sites from a criminological perspective. Indeed, the tourist site actually offers an exciting opportunity for criminologists because these sites are place-positioned; within them we find stories told *by* a collective *about* that collective. In other words we (as researchers) become privy to the ‘insider’ perspective on punishment. Penal museums and jail cell tours are storied spaces geared to explaining not only how but also why a collective punishes in the ways it does.

The aim of this current chapter then, is to contribute to this growing body of multi-disciplinary scholarship with an analysis of penal tourist sites in Texas (USA). Those visited included the Texas Prison Museum in Huntsville, the Eastland County Jail Museum, the Beaumont Police Museum and Jail Cells, and the Joe Byrd Cemetery (where prisoners can be buried). This chapter will begin by briefly outlining how the tourist sites told stories about the sheer size of Texas Department of Corrections (TDC). It will then move on to a discussion of how Lone Star punishment stories are often narratives of progress. Finally, the chapter will conclude by examining the ways in which these Texan sites of penal history depict the character of the prisoner.

### **Representing a tough Texas**

Visitors who tour Texan sites of penal history will likely conclude, as Perkinson (2001: 4) has, that Texas “reigns supreme in the punishment industry”. For example, a video is played to visitors as they enter the Texas Prison Museum and the narrator of the video (an elderly sounding man who has a strong Texan drawl) tells us that:

“The state of Texas undertook one of the largest prison construction programmes in the history of the free world. Prison capacity increased from 54,000 beds in 1991, to more than 150,000 in 1999 ... Today, with more than a half a million people already under some form of adult criminal supervision ... the Texas department of criminal justice operates one of the largest prison systems in the nation”

Similarly, the size of the Texas Department of Corrections (TDC) was continually referenced on the tours; “yeah, we have a lot of people under some kind of supervision. Yes ma’am its big business here in Texas” (Eastland guide). Another guide stated “I guess we got a lot of people on death row, but that’s because we believe it’s the right thing to do”, adding “you’ve heard the saying aint you? Don’t mess with Texas” (Beaumont guide).

However, while Texas is depicted as a place of punishment that is not to suggest the story is about failure, or an inability to manage criminality. On the contrary, this is lesson to other states (or other countries) about how to deal with crime and criminals. There is an air of confidence – bravado even – within the stories. The video played in the Prison Museum reflects this bold sentiment, telling us that Texas is “recognized by the American Correctional Association as [having] one of the best prison systems in the nation”. Yet the narrator is quick to remind the tourist that by “best prison system” he does not mean that the system is in any way merciful, or that conditions of confinement are more agreeable than elsewhere.

“Hard work is still the corner stone of the life of an inmate; prison is a difficult and tough place to live. The day begins well before dawn with a noisy wakeup call, followed by breakfast at 4.30. All able bodied inmates are expected to be on the job or at school by 5.30. There’s no lying around watching TV. The inmate areas of the unit are *not* air conditioned and inmates are *not* allowed to use any type of tobacco. The concrete floors and walls echo every sound. No inmate has any privacy outside their small cell” (emphasis in spoken original)

In a similar way to what Loader (1999) has called ‘police promotionalism’, the Texas Prison Museum and jail cell tour guides engage their audiences in what might be termed prison promotionalism. These museums and tours function as a kind of public relations exercise. We learn that Texas has got the “balance right”; punishment is safe, but it is also tough.

“I think the conditions in Texas are pretty tough, but that’s the point isn’t it? I mean we stick to the rules, but it isn’t supposed to be a vacation. Yes ma’am I reckon we got the balance right” (Eastland guide).

In many ways, these sites provide the TDC with an opportunity to mobilize narrative constructions in which the prison is not only necessary, but should be celebrated. Texas is telling proud stories about its own boldness in the penal sphere. The video played at the Prison Museum depicts this same image. The last statement made by the video's narrator is:

“While today's prisons are safer and more humane than years ago it's still a hard way of life. The state of Texas does not operate a country club prison”.

The sentiment is clear; the final sentence short and memorable. Speaking in the language of populist punitiveness (Pratt 2007) we learn that while Texan prisons might be safe, the state still adopts a tough approach to the punishment. Moreover, visiting the TDC Cemetery in Huntsville (pictured below) further enforces this image. The sheer number of gravestones, each representing a prisoner who had died or been executed, reminds the tourist that punishment in Texas must indeed be “big business” (Eastland guide).



This tough approach is further reflected in the museum spaces which depict Texas as fighting a ‘war’ on crime; a war in which there have been casualties. The evocation of the war metaphor is most easily illustrated by way of the military style memorials erected for officers who have died in the line of duty. Within the lobby of the Beaumont Police Station (which has a punishment museum in the basement) stands a memorial to four police officers who have died in the line of duty. There is also a monument outside the Prison Museum (pictured below) which “honours the men and women who valiantly served the state of Texas in the correctional system” (plinth at monument base). Similarly, deaths in the line of duty

cabinets were seen within the Texas Prison Museum, the Beaumont Police Museum and Jail Cells, the Border Patrol Museum and the Houston Police Museum. All of these displays evoke the war metaphor within their penal stories; they are not unlike displays commemorating the death of military soldiers.



Similar to news reporting about police officer deaths, using images of officers in uniform, phrases like ‘fallen heroes’ and engraving names on commemorative plaques, all conjure the image of a “battle between good and evil by means of symbolic signifiers” (Mythen 2011: 469). In short, the displays construct a narrative in which Texas is fighting a war on crime and the police/prison officers who have died in the line of duty should be awarded the status of heroic, courageous and honourable soldiers.

On closer inspection, there is actually rarely any indication within the displays that the deaths were even unlawful, let alone heroic in the course of duty. When asked, the curator of the Prison Museum and the tour guide at Beaumont both said many of those named in the museum display cabinets had died of heart attacks, road traffic accidents or falls at work. This (alternative) story is not told anywhere in the museums or tours unless a visitor probes further with those working at the museums. The displays are de-contextualized which ultimately distorts the ‘reality’ of the representation; it creates a void which can then be filled with imagined meaning. The audience is given no context cues to imagine an accident victim

and instead as Wagner-Pacific and Schwartz (1991: 379) contend, memorialisation assumes the people who have been “selected for commemoration [are] necessarily heroic and courageous”.

Yet whilst the displays dedicated to the symbolic soldiers are sombre spaces of memorialisation, punishment stories told in other parts of the sites are at times light-hearted, playing with the state’s tough reputation for comic effect. In the Prison Museum visitors can take part in the ‘cell for you’ experience in which tourists can have their photo taken inside a replica cell for \$3.00. Additionally, the Prison Museum gift shop sells ‘comically’ titled books such as *Meals to Die For* (a recipe book of executed inmates’ last meals), pullovers incorporating witty slogans like ‘Texas Prison Museum: preserving the best bars in Texas!’ and a women’s baby pink t-shirt with the image of a cartoon chain gang upon it.

The introduction of a comic tone serves to normalize the more severe elements of Texan punishment practises, to make them appear standard when – considering the punishment practices of other states and other countries – they are in fact somewhat unusual. Garland (2010: 56-57) is right to suggest that the peculiarity of the American death penalty means that “legislators, judges and prison officials take care to discuss the issue in solemn tones”; depicting it as a tragic necessity “they seem, in short, embarrassed, as if caught in a transgression”. Yet while this might be true of official statements made to the news media, the sites’ stories reveal a different attitude. There is no “palpable embarrassment” or “anxiety” (Garland 2010: 59), instead execution and harsh treatment becomes the fodder of comical musings. The stories construct Texas not only as a place of harsh punishment, but as a place which can – at times – joke about harsh punishment.

To find these comical elements might suggest that the punishment sites are what Stone (2006) has called dark fun factories; those visitor sites which have an entertainment focus and

commercial ethic while still associated with some form of suffering. Yet Stone (2006: 153) suggests that dark fun factories are often not considered to be “authentic” by the tourist. The punishment sites visited for this research make numerous claims to authenticity based on their location, the museum staff and the objects on display (see Walby and Piché 2015). As such, possibly a better framework in which to explore these comical elements is the literature associated with the ‘kitschification’ of memory.

Speaking instead about the commoditisation of Ground Zero, Sturken (2007: 217) contends that “the ‘teddy-bearification’ of 9/11, the development of a kitsch ‘comfort culture’ ... operates to smooth over tragedy ... constituting a kind of erasure of the effects of violence”. Selling cookery books with titles like ‘*Meals to Die For*’ and baby pink T-shirts sporting a chain gang might encourage a similar response. Speaking about prison tourism, Brown (2009) argues that introducing comical elements into the punishment story creates a distance between the audience and the subject matter of the museum/tour. This distance, she suggests, is what shields the penal spectator “from the most fundamental feature of punishment” – the infliction of pain (Brown 2009: 9). In short, the ‘humorous’ elements of the sites’ narratives not only normalize the more severe punishment(s) of which Texas has become associated, they also function to make light of the suffering associated with them; they serve to “mock the experience of incarceration” (Walby and Piché 2011: 464)

### **Representing modern punishment as civilized punishment**

After touring the punishment museums of the Lone Star State, it also became clear that Texan punishment stories were often narratives of progress. The stories rarely adhered to an event driven plot trajectory, but many of the stories could nevertheless be identified as having a temporally organized internal structure. In other words, the past was juxtaposed with the present in order to show Texan penal reform. This story of reform sought to construct punishment in the present as civilized in comparison to what came before. What will be

termed the ‘modernisation motif’ was found to manifest both in stories about execution and about conditions of confinement. For the purposes of this chapter though, we will examine the modernisation of execution as narrated by the Texas Prison Museum.

According to the director of the Prison Museum, one of the most popular displays in the museum is a constellation of displays which make up the ‘capital punishment exhibit’. While there is no set order in which to view these displays, their spatial organisation and yellow direction lines painted on the museum floor, mean that visitors are nonetheless encouraged to ‘read’ the displays in a certain order. This analysis will discuss the exhibits in the order that visitors find them; an order which begins with what Stone (2006) might refer to as a ‘dark tourism product’ – the electric chair.

As an exhibit the electric chair is placed in a theatrical setting. The lighting is much more subdued than in the rest of the museum, but the chair (pictured below) still casts a long shadow upon the floor. The object is displayed within a replica of the Walls Unit execution chamber, complete with brick walls, and a door and window which serve no function. The chair is protected by both a waist high glass wall and ropes.



RESEARCH DIARY: Most become quiet as the electric enters their view, almost respectful as they gaze at it and one assumes imagine its destructive force. A sense of unease seems to surround many of the adult visitors, helped by the security measures which add gravitas to a setting that scarcely needs it. They become awkward; their

eyes shifting away from what they are here to see; their bodies moving away faster than their morbid curiosity seems to desire. Yet they always glance back; one last glimpse of what might be an uncomfortable reminder of their own mortality

It is difficult to understand or explain exactly why people react in the way they do to what is essentially an inanimate object, especially considering the comical tone of other spaces and products associated with harsher punishments such as execution. It is as though the chair – as object rather than image – holds captive those whose lives it has taken; death clings to the air around it. It seems to possess “an auratic quality ... bestowed by death” (Smith 2008: 162).

Moreover, the chair is heavy with symbolism; for many it represents a less modern, less civilized era in American penal history (Brandon, 1999; Garland 2010; Smith 2008). Within the museum the glass wall and ropes which protect the chair encourage the audience to see it both as mysterious and antiquated. By making an object ‘untouchable’ it retains elements of the unknown, while also emphasizing its position in the past (Pearce 1994). Not just an object, the museum presents the chair as an artefact.

Yet while the electric chair’s story is no doubt told in past-tense that is not to suggest it is forgotten. As image and object, the chair has been seen in recent blockbuster movies (see Sarat 1999) and described in the pages of bestselling novels (see Owen and Ehrenhaus 2010). It has appeared in an exhibition by Andy Warhol (see Capers 2006) and on stage at Madonna’s world tour (see Smith 2008). The electric chair is more than just an object or image; it has achieved an iconic status within the culture industry.

The reality of seeing the chair is thus underpinned by a number of other (remembered) stories. Not dissimilar to Strange and Kempa’s (2003) account of touring the infamous Alcatraz, myths about the object weave together in the act of spectatorship (Brown 2009; Smith 2008). In Walby and Piché’s (2011) terms, the chair as an artefact illustrates the

polysemy of punishment memorialisation. Viewing the chair encourages other stories to ‘loop and spiral’ circling back upon one another (Ferrell *et al.* 2008). Films, documentaries, media reports, they all lend their own unpredictable and volatile moral meaning to the object (O’Malley 1999).

To add context to the experience, there is a poster to the right of the chair telling the audience about its history. The picture upon the poster is black and white as opposed to colour, grainy as opposed to defined. These visual communicative gestures give the image a “staged authenticity”; it will likely be interpreted as a genuine representation of a past reality (Walby and Piché 2015: 2). Moreover, the text on the poster explains that prison staff and prisoners both refer to the chair as ‘Old Sparky’ and electrocution as ‘riding the thunderbolt’. Inviting the audience to share in the discursive practices of the TDC serves to intensify the chair’s staged authenticity, encouraging tourists to feel part of the prisons “backstage world” (*ibid.*).

There is also a second poster, to the left of the chair, entitled ‘Anatomy of an Execution’ which is about death by lethal injection. In the centre of the poster is a clock-face, with an image of an executed inmate (Willie Pondexter) centred within it. Around the edges of the clock are images/text relating to various tasks undertaken before, during and after an execution. In contrast to the nostalgic tone of the chair’s story, the use of the word ‘anatomy’ associates lethal injection with the scientific and the medical. Inviting the viewer to recall images of frogs in textbooks or medical line drawings of the human body, the word no doubt has nuanced connotations of death, but not the painful gruesome death associated with electrocution (Denver *et al.* 2008).

While the death penalty continues to generate emotionally charged debate in the political, social and cultural spheres (Nagin and Pepper 2012), the use of the word ‘anatomy’ and the

image of a clock-face attempt to diffuse that emotionality by depicting lethal injection as a routine, scientifically sanitized, perfectly timed series of events. Moreover, this ‘anatomy’ poster is positioned in close proximity to the chair, rather than the needles (which are discussed shortly). This positioning encourages the audience to interpret the punishment story in terms of refinement, modernisation, and ultimately progress.

Garland (2010) suggests today’s authorities attempt to de-sensationalize the event of an execution. Entitling the poster about lethal injection ‘anatomy of an execution’ (when compared to ‘riding the thunderbolt’) can be understood as achieving that same goal. Moreover, those prison officers who are qualified to be involved in an execution by lethal injection, often referred to as the tie down team (Johnson 2005), are trained to be as precise as possible in order to reduce the likelihood of a ‘spectacle’. The aim is to make modern execution a “non-event” (Zimring and Hawkins 1989: 120). The positioning of the needles in the museum reflects this sentiment. No mock execution chamber, no gurney, they are instead placed in the bottom of cabinet which is actually dedicated to other things. The needles are a non-event within the museum.

The cabinet containing the needles is (somewhat confusingly) also the cabinet which displays paraphernalia relating to two controversial death row prisoners; Karla Faye Tucker and Gary Graham, both of whom were executed. Here we might expect to see a more critical form of punishment memorialisation, one which “contests dominant discourses concerning incarceration [or execution] and its supposed necessity” (Fiander, *et al* 2015:2). However, the viewer is not explicitly told why the executions caused controversy; rather this is *implied* by the abolitionist tone of the items within the cabinet. The museum’s story of modern – and by extension civilized – execution thus becomes entwined with the museum’s (brief) story about abolitionists.

Half of the needles cabinet is dedicated to prisoner Karla Faye Tucker and includes a 'stop executions' banner (made by the Texas coalitions against the death penalty) and a poster used in protest march (made by an anti-death penalty group in Copenhagen). The text under the photograph of Tucker states that she 'was executed in 1998 for murdering two people with a pickaxe'. The other half of the cabinet is dedicated to prisoner Gary Graham. The objects within this side of the cabinet include a noose and a burnt American flag. The text beneath Graham's picture states he was "sentenced to die by lethal injection for robbing and murdering a man ... Graham had also been charged in ten separate robberies and suspected in two shootings, ten car thefts, eight more shootings, and the rape of 57-year old women".

This cabinet is very interesting from a narrative perspective due to the polysemy at work within it (see Walby and Piché 2011). Firstly, we – the audience – are not told why these cases became controversial. Much like the death in the line of duty cabinets, the story is somewhat de-contextualized. Secondly, the objects on display are symbolically charged; they tell a specific story about abolitionists. The burnt American flag offers the suggestion that abolitionists (whatever their nationality) are unpatriotic and the noose seems to imply that abolitionists associate the modern death penalty either with legal hangings or illegal lynchings.

So this cabinet does not actually offer any representation of an abolitionist argument. We are given no reason to oppose the execution of Graham or Tucker, or to question the use of the death penalty more generally. While it may appear abolitionist in tone, this is not an example of critical punishment memorialisation, as identified in some Canadian penal museums by Fiander *et al* (2015). Somewhat confusingly, we are actually offered a retributive narrative that could be interpreted as in support of execution. The text

accompanying the photographs of both offenders encourages the (pro-death penalty) viewer to justify their executions based on the crimes they committed.

The final two instalments within the Texas Prison Museum's capital punishment exhibit are an audio recording played on a loop and a photographic display. The audio is emitted from a small display entitled 'witness to an execution'. The audio is a mixture of music and people speaking. The people speaking are members of the tie down team, spiritual advisors, associated press personnel and ex-warden Jim Willet. In one section, each interviewee states how many executions they have witnessed. Each sentence is said back to back. Purposefully repetitive, this section seems to encourage the listener to consider (if not outright question) the Texan commitment to harsh punishment. It is here that we begin to hear a more critical form of punishment memorialization (Fiander *et al* 2015).

Extract from Texas Prison Museum audio exhibit:

Bam, bam, bam, do 3 a year that's one thing, you do 35 a year – that's a lot'

'My name is Jim Brazzi [...] I've been with 114 people at the time of their execution'

'My name's Kenneth Dean. [...] I've participated in approximately 120 executions'

'Probably somewhere in the neighbourhood of 115 executions'

'Approximately 105, 110 executions'

'Thirty-six or thirty-seven executions'.

'130 executions'.

'I've witnessed 162 executions by lethal injection in the state of Texas'

The most poignant section within this audio though, comes later when the witnesses' describe what it is like to be in the room at the moment of death. According to Sarat (1999), the execution scene in death penalty movies often places the audience as a voyeur to someone else's voyeurism and listening to the audio places the tourist in a similar position. Yet while death penalty movies tend to involve the victim/crime (swapping between images of the gurney and the murder) the museum's audio does not. Rather, those interviewed turn attention to the offender/offender's family. Conversely, it is these people who are presented as the unlikely 'victims'.

'What will I say when I see God? I wrestle with myself about the fact that it's easier now and was I right to make part of my income from watching people die?'

'I had a mother collapse right in front of me; we were standing virtually shoulder to shoulder. I've seen them fall into the floor, totally lose control. You'll never hear another sound like a mother wailing whenever she's watching her son be executed'

'Some of them [the condemned] are very calm, some of them are upset, some of them cry ... usually in about 20 seconds, he's completely strapped in ... After all the straps are done they look you in the eye and they tell you thank you for everything you've done. It's kind of a weird thing ... A lot of inmates apologize ... I know that at times they know when it's happening to them. One in particular I can remember, he said 'I can taste it''

Unlike Brown's (2009) conclusions about other penal tourist sites, this exhibit in the Texas Prison Museum does not 'look away' from the act of punishing; the distance between the visitor and the condemned is never smaller than it is when listening to this audio recording. Rather than presenting a vague unease about the act of punishing (Brown 2009), the disquiet of the execution team is clear and explicit. The shift of focus (onto the offender

and his family as victims), along with the sombre tone might suggest that the audio, in isolation, could be interpreted as critical of the Texan commitment to harsh punishment. But it is not heard in isolation, it is instead part of the modernisation motif. It is one aspect of a bigger picture in which execution is presented as serene, sterilized, medicalized and civilized. Indeed, certain elements of the audio reference this storied construction of the lethal injection as bringing about a more peaceful death.

‘Then we’ll say “it’s time” and they’ll unlock the cell. He’s not handcuffed or chained He and I will walk into the chamber’

‘one man wanted to sing Silent Night. He made his final statement and then after the warden gave the signal he started singing Silent Night and he got to the part ‘round yon virgin mother and child’ and just as he got ‘child’ out – that was the last word’

‘The people inside, watching, they are invariably quiet’

‘It’s very quiet, it’s extremely quiet. You can hear every breath everyone takes around you’

So this audio display is actually quite complex, and – like the chair as object – might seem to be an illustration of the polysemy of punishment memorialization often found in spaces of penal tourism (see Walby and Piché 2011). On the one hand, it appears somewhat critical of the Texan commitment to execution (you do 35 a year, and that’s a lot) and also positions the prisoner/prisoner’s family as victims (you’ll never hear another sound like a mother wailing). Yet on the other hand, it portrays the execution as a quiet event (you can hear every breath), while also suggesting the prisoner’s death is as civilized as the taking of life can be (he’s not handcuffed or chained). It is worth noting though, that while the tone of the audio diverges from the celebratory stories of Texan punishment, this divergence does not

actually undermine the modernisation motif. Modern punishment is still presented as civilized punishment.

However, the photographic display mentioned earlier does represent a real tension within the execution story, because it is here we find the scripts of victimhood, something which thus far the museum has avoided. The exhibit (pictured below) is sixteen photographs in two rows of eight. One side are pictures/statements of the family members of murder victims. The other side are images/statements of family members of people who have been executed.



A statement from the artist accompanies the exhibit, in which she describes the families of those who have been executed as the “forgotten victims of crime”. Within the statement she also explains why she felt the need to undertake the project:

“I started thinking about the families’ execution leaves behind ... It really is a moving conversation to speak with a parent, any parent, who has lost a child”

Both ‘sets’ of families (of the victim and the executed) are constructed as victims. This sense of symmetry is also reflected both in the composition of the exhibit and in the similarity of sentiment within the written statements. This symmetry compels the viewer to at least consider the possibility that we should afford the executed mans’ family victim status; they

too have suffered a loss. One mother, whose son was murdered, makes this quite clear in her own statement

“Yolanda’s pain was the same as mine. A son is a son. It doesn’t matter whether you lose them as a victim or a criminal. The pain is the same”.

Christie (1986) has discussed the construction of victimhood in news reporting, arguing that the legitimacy of claims for victimhood recognition will differ significantly if the victim is ‘ideal’ or not. Ideal victims tend to be viewed as entirely ‘innocent’ and in no way deserving of their victimisation, while in contrast non-ideal victims might include rape victims who are sex workers, mugging victims who were drunk or victims who have a criminal record. The photographic exhibit can thus be interpreted as both a story about ideal victims (the murder victim’s family) and un-ideal victims (the executed man’s family).

Moreover, the display might be seen by tourists as somehow abolitionist in tone, as an attempt to make them question the death penalty from a moral perspective because execution makes (albeit non-ideal) victims of innocent people, the executed man’s family. Yet the display also speaks in a language understood by death penalty advocates; ideal victims express their continued suffering. For example, Mike Miller (son of murder victim Noel Miller) states:

“My sister and I were robbed of the opportunity to know our dad and have him be part of our lives”.

Yet while this museum exhibit might be interpreted as pro-death penalty due to the ideal victim’s statements of suffering, there are other suggestions (in addition to the artists’ statement and the symmetry of loss) that this is more accurately an anti-death penalty exhibit. For example, one statement within this exhibit, made by Darryl Bell (the cousin of Derrick

Leon Jackson, executed in 2010), raised a number of questions about the ‘bias’ within a ‘broken system’ including ineffective council. These statements openly invite the visitor to question the legitimacy of the death penalty. In Fiander *et al’s* (2015) terms, this is truly a form of critical punishment memorization. Moreover, unlike many other cultural products, both non-ideal and ideal victims are telling this anti-execution story. Claudia Beseda-Burns (daughter of murder victim Elizibeth Beseda) states “I don’t believe in capital punishment. I’ve never felt anyone had the right to take another person’s life”.

In summary, the collection of exhibits which make up the ‘capital punishment display’ put forward a specific narrative framework within which to interpret how Texas punishes. By juxtaposing the past and the present, the old against the new, modern punishment becomes synonymous with civilized punishment. Rather than seeing a representation of a ‘vengeful’ state, this modernisation motif actually serves to construct the image of a compassionate state; one which seeks to improve and refine the methods by which it punishes. As an audience to these sites of penal tourism, we learn that Texas is tough but fair, and that Texas continues to modernize the practice of punishment.

However, what we have yet to look at in any great detail is how the tourist sites speak about the prisoners themselves. This final section will thus consider the stories the museums/tour guides told about the ‘character’ of prisoners and the nature of prison.

### **Representing prisoner identities**

Within the punishment stories of Lone Star museums the characterisation of the prisoner was often that of a dangerous, predatory, animalistic criminal, capable of heinous acts and showing little remorse. For example, in the Texas Prison Museum one of the first cabinets tourists see is filled with contraband items. These include a variety of homemade weapons such as a blade hidden in a flip-flop and a 5-sided throwing star. We are told that all of the

weapons were seized during cell searches, and that some were used in attacks against staff and other prisoners. In addition, the early cabinets also tell stories about escape attempts. While all of these attempts were unsuccessful (the prisoners were killed during the escape, re-imprisoned, or later executed) they still represent violent – sometimes deadly – exchanges between captors and their captives.

The portrayal of the inmate as a ‘dangerous criminal’ was also identified within the jail tours in both Eastland (pictured below) and Beaumont. The cells themselves tell the story of a caged body but the experience of being confined within the cell, listening to the tour guide stories, animates the image further.



“They’d thrash around in here, the crazy ones; clawing and stuff. They’re the most dangerous in my opinion, because they were just so unpredictable you know?”  
(Eastland guide)

“Some of them would get crazy, like animals, so none of them could have proper plates or knives; nothing like that. Some days they’d be fine, but other days they’d be fixing to use them as weapons. You’d be amazed at what can be made into a weapon, ingenious really” (Beaumont guide)

This storied construction of the ‘dangerous criminal’ identity is also reflected in the variety of displays already discussed about deaths in the line of duty. Telling these types of stories, about contraband weapons, violent escape attempts, ‘crazy animals’ and murdered

officers, reminds the audience that prisoners pose a very real threat. Moreover, this ‘dangerous criminal’ identity is regularly the fodder of other cultural stories told about crime and punishment (Dorfman *et al* 1997). Take for example TV crime dramas (Surette 2011), action movies (Creekmur 2001) or comic books/graphic novels and their adaptations (Kort-Butler 2012). These all however represent a fictional threat; most make no claim to be ‘based on a true story’. Unlike the museums/tours, they do not declare representational authenticity, staged or otherwise (Walby and Piché 2011). More applicable then, might be those cultural stories that seek to represent reality such as news reporting where the image of a dangerous criminal is often at its most extreme (Surette 2011). Yet there are other similarities too. As Jewkes (2011) suggests, values such as simplicity, violence and risk shape crime news, and the museums stories adopt similar values. However, while the identity of the criminal offered in news media stories is similar to that in the sites studied, there are two significant differences between them.

Firstly, crime stories in the news media tend to focus on individual offenders (Dowler *et al* 2006; Greer and Reiner 2012; Jewkes 2011) and in fictional crime stories, on both the offender and the working of law enforcement more broadly (Boda and Szabó 2011; Grodal 2011). Within the Prison Museum, the spaces dedicated to the dangerous prisoner identity rarely make mention of individual prisoners or allude to the story of their apprehension. The constructed identity is based on collective behaviour(s) rather than that of any one individual.

Secondly, the crime stories told in the news reporting media are usually set in public spaces, such as a housing estate, a playground, a poorly lit footpath or an abandoned warehouse. By contrast, the museums stories are primarily set inside a prison or jail; a closed, some say secretive institution (Roth 2006). In many ways the museums actually pick up the crime story where other cultural products often leave it. Usual narrative trajectories – the race against time to subjugate danger – do not feature. Within the museum/tour stories, the

criminal is no longer a threat to the public; rather it is a threat contained in places and spaces we know little about.

So the popularity of prison related tourism, as Wilson (2008) contends, can (at least in part) be explained by the secretive nature of the prison itself. These sites are telling private stories (about prison life) on a public stage (the museum/tour). Marketing themselves in highly specific ways, punishment-related tourist sites purport to offer an “exclusive opportunity unlike any other”; they recast the ‘outsider’ status of the prison in commodified form (Luscombe *et al* 2015:11). As such, the depiction of the dangerous criminal identity (as offered by the museum/tours) is most closely comparable to the portrayal in prison documentaries. While the commodification techniques and marketing devices used to ‘sell’ documentaries are different, there are nevertheless similarities in the way each seek to advertise themselves to prospective punters. Most notably, unlike films or literature, both documentaries and museums purport to be authentic representations of reality, yet there are more analytical similarities which are worthy of discussion.

According to Cecil and Leitner (2009) the documentary series *Lock Up* focuses on the ‘worst of the worst’ offenders, specifically those who had committed violent crimes, are in prison gangs and are heavily tattooed. The Texas Prison Museum likewise includes a large poster dedicated to prison gang tattoos. Moreover, within the museum stories and the documentaries the dangerous prisoner, rather than symbolic of fear, represents a victory of sorts; they are symbols of a successful prison system containing threat and protecting the public. This too is a type of prison promotionalism, discussed earlier in the chapter. Much the same can be said about the items in the contraband cabinet. Once integral to a private story of violence and brutality, they are now displayed within a public narrative about successful cell raids. Both the setting of the stories (non-public) and the objects used to tell them (confiscated contraband) construct a narrative which is not exclusively centred on fear

of crime. These are stories about a threat which is being successfully contained. Yet alongside these stories of a successfully contained threat are a number of displays about a very different kind of prisoner; one we need not fear at all.

Within the Texas Prison Museum, toward the middle/end of the museum experience, we see cabinets filled with prison arts and crafts, a cabinet about female death row prisoners and their quilt/doll making, a display of prisoner carpentry and an exhibit explaining that prisoners train guide dogs for returning service men and women who have been injured in war. The audience are led to assume that these prisoners no longer pose any immediate threat or danger, after all they have been given access to scissors, saws, needles and animals. Yet they perform another symbolic function too; they serve to de-contextualize these so-called privileged activities.

The cabinets tell self-contained stories about inmates and their creative pursuits, but as an audience we learn little about the men and women who have created the items. We are left unsure how or why a prisoner might receive such freedoms, or indeed if the prisoners themselves view the activities as privileges at all. In reality, prisoners often engage in carpentry or other creative pursuits in order to avoid the inevitable sense of time passing. As Goffman (1961:68) suggests, “a premium [is] placed on what might be called removal activities, namely, voluntary unserious pursuits which are sufficiently engrossing and exciting to lift the participant out of himself, making him oblivious for the time to his actual situation”.

Moreover, as Wilson (2008:160) contends, displaying the produce of ‘removal activities’ in museum spaces can actually be viewed as a form of exploitation. It is unlikely that incarcerated artists ever meant for their work to become part of a story promoting Texan prisons as civilized and civilising. Similarly, tourists can buy prisoner-made leather items

from the Texas Prison Museum gift shop. While these items are made with the consumer in mind (some are even custom made), they nevertheless represent the commodification of so-called freedoms; the significance of the object and the act of creating it changes (see Luscombe *et al* 2015).

Yet these items, and the stories they tell of a prisoner's reform, are also important because they encourage the audience to conclude that prison is an institution capable of transforming the once dangerous criminals. Similarly, by selling prisoner crafted leather goods in the gift shop the tourist is invited to take this reform narrative home with them (see Luscombe *et al* 2015). Showing the souvenir to their friends and family, or giving it as a gift, means the reformed prisoner story (and the narrative of a civilised prison) will likely loop and spiral far beyond the Texas Prison Museum.

The dual nature of the prisoner identity (dangerous /reformed) means the prison film is arguably the closest match to that offered in the museums. As Valverde (2006) suggests the majority of prison movies do attempt to humanize at least some of the offenders within the narrative, while simultaneously portraying other prisoners as 'dangerous'. However, in prison movies the lead character is often innocent and at times is even awarded a hero status (Bennett 2006). This is not the case in the museum. Humanizing politics work to make the reformed prisoner appear 'civilized', but the incarcerated are never portrayed as innocent or heroic. Moreover, in those prison films where the 'reformed' character is guilty, the crime tends to be minor or non-violent (Mason 2006). What are less common then are cultural stories that work to humanize real-life offenders who have committed heinous crimes. In short, we rarely see humanizing politics at work in cultural stories told about death row prisoners.

However, while uncommon, one significant attempt has been made to represent guilty death row prisoners as 'reformed' characters, and thus shares similarities with the museum story. The Benetton advertising campaign entitled 'We on Death Row' used images of and statements made by convicted killers awaiting execution on death rows across America (see Girling 2004). The campaign received an onslaught of negative press due to the partiality in the narrative; there was no victim voice (Goeddertz 2004). While a previous Benetton campaign featuring an image of the electric chair had received little attention on the national stage, the 'We on Death Row' billboards were deemed unacceptable by a number of victim advocacy groups. Benetton were accused of sympathising with murderers (Kraidy and Goeddertz 2004). However, while the Texas museum stories do attempt to humanize death row prisoners, the narrative is different to that of the Benetton campaign.

Firstly, the museum story is not partial. Victims' voices are represented elsewhere in the museum (the photography exhibit discussed earlier) as is the 'dangerous criminal' identity (the contraband cabinets, escape attempts and memorials). Secondly, 'We on Death Row' used direct quotations to humanize the death row prisoners. The audience is encouraged to hear the offender's story through their own words and, by extension, to judge their claims of reform. Our museum story replaces those words with objects. Displaying prisoner artwork, leatherwork, carpentry and tapestry does represent an attempt to humanize the imprisoned, but they also serve to silence their voice. Rather than a declaration of reform from a prisoner's mouth (as in the Benetton campaign), these are implicit assertions made by the museum. By implying the reform narrative through non-verbal communicative gestures, the museum will likely sidestep much of the controversy associated with Benetton. There is no 'face' staring back at the audience asking for forgiveness; the tourist does not 'see' the condemned and in turn they can also go 'unseen'. The dynamics of spectatorship are entirely different.

The third difference between the museum and the ‘We on Death Row’ campaign is arguably the most significant in that it allows the reform narrative to comfortably co-exist with that of the Victims’ Rights campaigners. Whereas Benetton was seen as humanizing prisoners in an attempt to generate support for abolition, the museum humanizes but offers no such suggestion. For example, dolls made by the ‘women of death row’ are exhibited in the museum. We are told they were made ‘twenty years ago’, but that is all. These women (we presume) have either been executed or are still awaiting execution. The museum humanizes the prisoners but, unlike the Benetton campaign, does so without making the condemned men and women characters in an abolitionist story.

In short, there is no suggestion anywhere in the museum narrative that the ‘reformed inmate’ should not be executed, or that any prisoner, however dependable or responsible, should receive a reduction in sentence. The museum removes its ‘reformed inmate story’ from wider debates about the appropriateness of execution by avoiding them entirely, and ultimately allows the audience to see the prisoners as reformed, but still deserving of punishment. The stories told about prisoner reform are thus not in competition with any critical narrative about how ‘good behaviour’ might signal a reduction in punishment. These prisoners are awarded privileges (such as access to carpentry tools), but the audience can view this redemption as a personal journey; no amount of ‘good behaviour’ will impact their sentence. After all, Texas does not run a ‘country club prison’.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has examined some of the stories Texas is telling about its own relationship with punishment in its penal history museums. By examining the narratives at work within these Texan sites of penal history we were able to uncover a more nuanced understanding of why and how Texas narrates the punishment of its offenders. For example, in the first instance we found that Texas uses scripts of boldness and toughness to depict Lone Star justice. The penal

museums do little to shy away from the Texan reputation for punitiveness. Instead, the museums tell proud stories about a state winning the war on crime. A pedagogical narrative thread is weaved throughout the tourist sites visited, teaching their audiences about the success of the TDC. In short, the museums were found to engage in a form of prison promotionalism.

The second part of this chapter examined the collection of displays which made up the capital punishment exhibit in the Texas Prison Museum. By doing so, we found that the exhibit was actually a complex compilation of audio, image, text and object, which together told the story of execution by both electrocution and lethal injection. It was argued that by juxtaposing the old against the new the story employed a modernisation motif; it became a narrative of Texan progress. As visitors, we learned that while execution in Texas was once a somewhat brutal affair, it is now more civilized, sanitized and medicalized. The stories told by cultural outsiders may portray the state in terms of judicial excess, but the museums – the cultural insiders – did not adhere to this narrative construction.

Lastly, we took a journey through prisoner identities to examine how the Lone Star State's penal museums portrayed the character of both the prison and the prisoner. From this analysis we identified that the sites speak about two types of prisoners, the dangerous criminal and the reformed prisoner. In addition, we also found that these portrayals likewise exist to promote the pro-prison discourse; if the prisoner is perceived as a threat, the prison is successfully containing that danger and if the prisoner has found redemption then the prison becomes the space in which this was achieved. Moreover, it was argued that by portraying the 'reformed' prisoners as still deserving of harsh punishment the audience can see reform and redemption as a personal journey. Texan prisons can be celebrated as supposedly civilised places in which creativity can flourish without comprising the Texan reputation for tough (but fair) sentencing.

We began this chapter with a very brief explanation of why museums and tours could and should be understood as significant sites in which to do criminological research. Indeed, while other cultural (re)presentations have become a fertile ground for scholars to explore the meanings of crime and punishment (as they manifest in performances, rituals, symbols and metaphors), museums remain a somewhat under-appreciated site of storytelling. By touring the penal museums of the Lone Star State, and analysing their narrative content, we have seen the richness of data waiting to be uncovered. From poignant stories about witnessing an execution to celebratory stories of toughness in the penal sphere, from sad stories about symbolic soldiers losing their lives in the war on crime to comical stories which serve to mock the pains of imprisonment, the museum as research site has much to offer.

## References

Bennett, Jamie. 2006. The Good, the Bad and the Ugly: The Media in Prison Films. *The Howard Journal of Criminal Justice*. 45/2: 95-115.

Boda, Zsolt and Gabriella Szabó. 2011. The Media and Attitudes Towards Crime and the Criminal Justice System: A Qualitative Approach. *European Journal of Criminology*. 8/4: 329-342.

Brandon, Craig. 1999. *The Electric Chair: An Unnatural American History*. North Carolina: McFarland & Company Inc. Publishers.

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

Capers, Bennett 2006. On Andy Warhol's Electric Chair. *California Law Review*. 94/1: 243-260.

Cecil, Dawn and Jennifer Leitner. 2009. Unlocking the Gates: an Examination of MSNBC Investigates – Lock Up. *The Howard Journal of Criminal Justice*. 48/2:184-199.

Christie, Nils. 1986. The Ideal Victim. In: Ezzat Fattah (ed) *From Crime Policy to Victim Policy*. London: MacMillan Publishers.

Creekmur, Cory. 2001. On the run and on the road: Fame and the outlaw in American Cinema. In: *The Road Movie Book*. London: Routledge.

Denver, Megan, Joel Best and Kenneth Hass. 2008. Methods of Execution as Institutional Fads. *Punishment and Society*. 10/3: 227-252.

Dorfman, Lori, Katie Woodruff, Vivian Chavaz and Laurence Wallak. 1997. Youth and Violence on Local Television News in California. *American Journal of Public Health*. 87:1311 – 1316.

Dowler, Ken, Thomas Fleming and Stephen Muzzatti. 2006. Constructing Crime: Media, Crime and Popular Culture. *Canadian Journal of Criminology and Criminal Justice*. 48/6: 837-850.

Fiander, Sarah, Ashley Chen, Justin Piché and Kevin Walby 2015. Critical punishment memorialization in Canada. *Critical Criminology*. 10.1007/s10612-015-9271-x

Ferrell, Jeff, Keith Hayward and Jock Young. 2008. *Cultural Criminology: An Invitation*. London: Sage Publishing.

Garland, David. 2010. *Peculiar Institution: America's Death Penalty in an Age of Abolition*. Oxford University Press: New York.

Girling, Evi. 2004. 'Looking Death in the Face'. The Benetton Death Penalty Campaign. *Punishment and Society*. 6/3: 271-287.

Goffman, Erving (1961) *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates*. New York: Anchor Books

Greer, Chris. 2007. 'News, Media, Victims and Crimes'. In: Pamela Davies (ed) and Peter Francis (ed) *Victims, Crimes and Society*. London: Sage.

Greer, Chris. and Robert Reiner. 2012. Mediated Mayhem: Media, Crime and Criminal Justice. In: Maguire, M., R. Morgan and R. Reiner (eds) *The Oxford Handbook of Criminology* (4<sup>th</sup> ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Grodal. Torben, 2011. Crime Fiction and Moral Emotions: How Context Lures the Moral Attitudes of Viewers and Readers. In: *Northern Lights: Film and Studies Yearbook*. 9/1: 143-147

Jewkes, Yvonne. 2011. *Media and Crime*. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. London: Sage Publications.

Johnson, Robert. 2005. *Death Work: A Study of the Modern Execution Process*. California: Polity Press.

Kort-Butler, Lisa 2012. Rotten, Vile, and Depraved! Depictions of Criminality in Superhero Cartoons. *Deviant Behaviour*. 33/7: 566-581.

Kraidy, Marwan and Tamara Goeddertz. 2004. Transactional Advertising and International Relations: US Press Discourses on the Benetton 'We on Death Row' Campaign. *Media Culture and Society*. 25: 147- 165.

Loader, Ian 1999. Consumer Culture and the Commodification of Policing and Security. *Sociology*. 33/2: 373-392.

Luscombe, Alex, Kevin, Wlaby and Justin Piché 2015 Making Punishment Memorialization Pay? Marketing, Networks, and Souvenirs at Small Penal History Museums in Canada. *Journal of Hospitality & Tourism Research* 1096348015597032

Mason, Paul. 2006. Prison Decayed: Cinematic Penal Discourse and Populism 1995-2005. *Social Semiotics*. 16/4: 607-626.

Mythen, Gabe 2011. Cultural Criminology: Are We All Victims Now? In: Sandra Walklate (ed.), *Handbook of Victims and Victimology*. Oxford: Routledge.

Nagin, Daniel. and John Pepper. 2012. *Deterrence and the Death Penalty*. Committee on the Death Penalty. Washington: The National Academies Press.

O'Malley, Pat 1999. Volatile and Contradictory Punishment. *Theoretical Criminology*. 3/2: 175-196.

Owen, Susan and Peter Ehrenhaus 2010. Communities of Memory, Entanglement and Claims of the Past and Present: Reading Race Trauma Through The Green Mile. *Critical Studies in Media Communication*. 27/2: 131-154.

Pearce, Susan. 1994. *Museums and the Appropriation of Culture*. London: The Athlone Press.

Perkinson, Robert. 2010. *Texas Tough: The Rise of America's Prison Empire*. New York: Metropolitan Books.

Roth, Mitchel P. 2006. *Prisons and Prison Systems: A Global Encyclopaedia*. Westport: Greenwood Press.

Sarat, Austin 1999. 'The Cultural Life of Capital Punishment: Responsibility and Representation in Dead Man Walking and Last Dance'. In: *The Killing State. Capital Punishment in Law, Politics and Culture*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Smith, Philip 2008. *Punishment and Culture*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Stone, Philip 2006. A Dark Tourism Spectrum: Towards a Typology of Death and Macabre Related Tourist Sites, Attractions and Exhibitions. *Tourism: An Interdisciplinary International Journal* 54/2: 145-160.

Strange, Carolyn. and Michael Kempa 2003. Shades of Dark Tourism: Alcatraz and Robben Island. *Annals of Tourism Research*. 30/2: 386-485.

Sturken, Marita. 2007. *Tourists of History Memory, Kitsch and Consumerism From Oklahoma City to Ground Zero*. North Carolina: Dukes University Press.

Surette, Ray. 2011. *Media: Images, Realities and Policies* 4<sup>th</sup> Edition. USA. Cengage Learning.

Valverde, Mariana. 2006. *Law and Order: Images, Meanings and Myths*. Oxford: Rutgers University Press.

Wagner-Pacifici, Robin and Barry Schwartz. 1991. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial: Commemorating a Difficult Past. *American Journal of Sociology*. 97/2: 376-420.

Walby, Kevin and Justin Piché. 2011. The Polysemy of Punishment Memorialisation: Dark Tourism and Ontario's Penal History Museums. *Punishment and Society*. 13/4: 451-472.

Walby, Kevin and Justin Piché. 2015. Stages authenticity in penal history sites across Canada. *Tourist Studies*. 1468797615579564

Wilson, Jacqueline Z. 2008. *Prison: Cultural Memory and Dark Tourism*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing.

Zimring, Franklin. and Gordon Hawkins. 1989. *Capital Punishment and the American Agenda*. USA: Cambridge University Press.