Entering the Maze: Space, Time and Exclusion in an Abandoned Northern Ireland Prison

[O]ur deepest thoughts and feelings pass to us through perplexed combinations of concrete objects… in compound experiences incapable of being disentangled (De Quincey, 1998: 104).

Figure 1

1. Introduction

Our hotel room, a cheap, smelly affair with 1970s puke-coloured wallpaper and a psychedelic flower-patterned rug, just outside of Belfast in Northern Ireland, is littered with ropes, harnesses, camera gear, beer bottles, makeup, computer equipment, sleeping bags, academic journal articles and 30 meters of rope. We're trying to make the rope climbable, stretching it down the hotel corridor, testing variations, debating feasibility. We settle on doubling the rope over and tying fat knots to step into, and go to sleep. The alarm clock goes off at 2am. We crawl out of bed, bleary-eyed, grab our bags, and trudge down to the car. We had scoped out our access route the night before but this does not ease the anxiety. We park in the driveway of an abandoned house and sneak through an alleyway into the grounds. It's quiet. It feels empty. But we know it's not – security is here somewhere, waiting for us.

We run low to the front gates. One of us climbs the outside of the gates using protruding electrical boxes and cable sheathing as holds. At the top, the ropes are taken out of a backpack, a

sling strung through the pipe sheathing and a carabineer clicks it all together with a snap. Securely fastened, the ropes are heaved over the wall, dropping into the prison yard with a thick thump. The process of climbing down is more of a slide than the hand-over-hand controlled descent we had planned. Thud, thud, thud. With raw palms, we looked at each other, and then at the labyrinth before us. We were inside the Maze.

Figure 2

2. A history of the Maze / Long Kesh

Her Majesty's Prison Maze, also known as 'Maze Prison', 'the Maze' and 'Long Kesh' closed down in 2000. [1] For three decades before that time, the Maze was the site of intense political struggle as those interned and imprisoned for crimes related to Ireland's civil ethno-nationalist conflict (known colloquially as "the Troubles") demanded the restoration of Special Category Status (SCS); a '*de facto* prisoner of war status' (McEvoy, 2001: 217; Ross, 2011). [2] This status granted many of the privileges afforded to political prisoners, most symbolically important of which was the right to refuse prison uniform (Graham and Dowell, 2007). [3] Significantly, the

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[1] Terminological neutrality is virtually impossible in any discussion of Northern Ireland (or, to nationalists, "Ulster"): to use one term over another invariably places a writer on one side of the conflict (Beresford, 1987: 7; see Graham and McDowell, 2007). Our choice of "the Maze" is figurative rather than political.

[2] On the British Army's Operation Demetrius and the introduction of internment without trial in Northern Ireland see, for example, Dickson (2009), McCleery (2012), and CAIN (2014a). By late 1975 the prison held almost 2000 two thousand internees (around 95% of whom were Catholic and opposed British occupation of Northern Ireland).

[3] The official classification "special category" intentionally stopped short of designating full political status, and was rather, a pragmatic (and, ultimately, revocable) concession on the part of the British government (Corcoran, 2006: 25).

construction of the "H-Blocks" of the Maze was a direct result of the British government policy of "criminalisation" or the withdrawal of SCS (see Gardiner, 1975; Stevenson, 1996). For this reason, and as the site of the ensuing series of protests, the Maze inexorably came to symbolise a dark chapter of the Troubles.

In accordance with the policy of criminalisation, those convicted of terrorism-related offences from March 1976 would no longer be entitled to SCS and would instead be treated as ordinary criminals. As prisoners were convicted under the new regime, many refused to wear prison uniform, choosing instead to wrap themselves in prison-issue blankets in what is now known as the "blanket protest" (CAIN, 2014b; see Beresford, 1987, Bishop and Mallie, 1987; Ross, 2011). The refusal of the "blanketmen" to comply with prison rules carried a series of punishments including the loss of exercise period and visiting privileges, removal of furniture from their cells, the loss of remission and a reduced dietary (Beresford, 1987; Bishop and Mallie, 1987).

Because "instructions to break the prisoners came from the highest levels of government" (former prison officer, quoted in Feldman, 1991: 191) the prisoners found their protests countered by increasingly punitive and brutal measures. Whilst the blanketmen were initially granted a second towel for bathing, from 1977 the prison authorities introduced a one-towel rule, demanding that republican prisoners be naked before their loyalist warders (Scarlata, 2014: 107). Prisoners responded by refusing to wash, and so the "no-wash" phase of the protest began. This, in turn, was met with beatings, forced bathings, shavings and haircuts, and violent body cavity searches by prison officers (Scarlata, 2014).

In 1978, prison authorities decreed that prisoners would not be allowed to the toilets without a uniform, and must empty their own chamber pots. For prisoners, emptying their own pots technically constituted a form of prison labour (usually performed by orderlies) and was thus a step towards conforming to the prison regime (Scarlata, 2014: 108). Instead, prisoners poured their urine under their cell doors and emptied excrement into the prison yard. Prison guards responded by mopping urine and excrement back under the cell doors, and by spraying high-powered hoses into the cells, soaking and bruising the men inside (see Fierke, 2013, Ch.4). Prisoners thus began the "dirt protest", the tactic of smearing excrement over their cell walls and ceilings. [4] This was 'a method that enabled it to dry quickly… taking the edge off the intensity of the odor' (Scarlata, 2014: 108), and which prevented it being used as a 'weapon' against them by the guards (Fierke, 2013: 116).

The decision to hunger strike in 1980 was then, the culmination of a campaign of non-cooperation lasting more than four years (Fierke, 2013). A first hunger strike lasted to December 1980 when, with one of the strikers on the brink of death, the British government appeared to concede to a settlement (Beresford, 1987: 43; see Taylor, 1998; Coogan, 2002). However, once the strike was over, it became clear that the prisoners' demands would not be recognised. A second hunger strike, led by Bobby Sands – then-Officer Commanding of the Provisional IRA (PIRA) within the Maze prison – began in March 1981, timed to coincide with the fifth anniversary of the dissolution of SCS. The strike was to last seven months, during which time ten republican prisoners, including Sands, starved to death (see Beresford, 1987; Feldman, 1991).

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[4] This phase is often referred to as the "*dirty* protest", although see Scarlata (2014: 109) on the significance of subtly different phrasing here.

The H-blocks of the Maze and the struggles that took place within them marked a particularly bleak period of the Troubles for those on both sides of the conflict. Between 1976 and 1980, nineteen prison officers were assassinated by the PIRA in attempted retaliation for various instances of brutality within the prison (see Feldman, 1991). [5] Moreover, the hunger strikers' defeat was in many ways a pyrrhic victory for the British government: Sands' death was met with widespread rioting, and PIRA recruitment soared in the following months, along with a surge of paramilitary activity (English, 2003). The 1984 Brighton hotel bombing would later be claimed as a revenge attack against Margaret Thatcher for "tortur[ing] our prisoners" (PIRA statement, quoted in quoted in Taylor, 2001: 265). Furthermore, following Sands' death the British government faced extensive international condemnation and its relationship with the Irish governments became further strained (CAIN, 2014b).

In 1983, thirty-eight PIRA prisoners escaped from the Maze, considered at the time to be one of the most "escape-proof" prisons in Europe. This was also the largest prison escape in British history (see Dunne, 1988; Kelly, 2013). During the escape – a major propaganda coup for the IRA – one prison officer died and twenty others were injured (Lawther, 2014). In 1997, a forty-foot tunnel, fitted with electric lighting and a makeshift oxygen supply, was found leading from H-block 7, where IRA inmates were held (BBC, 1998). Tons of soil and rubble were later found in unchecked adjacent cells, seeming proof that the paramilitaries effectively controlled the wings to which they were confined (Oliver, 2000).

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[5] Space precludes a review of the far less researched and publicised experiences of the prison officers who served at the Maze during this period, however readers are referred to work by Ryder (2000) and McAloney (2011).

Following the 1994 PIRA ceasefire and a gradual easing of tensions, the 1998 Good Friday Agreement determined that all paramilitary prisoners belonging to organisations on ceasefire were to be released within two years (Graham and McDowell, 2007). Despite the controversy surrounding the early release of prisoners – some of whom were serving sentences for murder, bombings and shootings – in August 2000, the final paramilitary prisoners were released and the Maze was officially closed. However, the enduring materiality of the Maze has since continued to "haunt" the peace process (McAtackney, 2014). In 2008, the penultimate H-Block structure was demolished, leaving H6, initially retained as part of the inquiry into the murder of loyalist leader Billy Wright outside the block in 1997 (Andrews, 2010), as a final "representative sample", along with the prison hospital, a chapel, a control room and a handful of administrative buildings (McAtackney, 2014).

Figure 3

Figure 4

Figure 5

3. Unorthodox praxis for unorthodox space

Today, the remaining H-Block, along with adjoining administrative buildings, is an island, *a space once built to let no one out that now allows no one in*. Criminologists might well ask why anyone would go to such lengths to trespass in a space such as the Maze[6]. The answer, like the place itself, is not an uncomplicated one and is perhaps best articulated by the London historian

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[6] The remaining buildings at the Maze were in fact opened to the public for supervised European Heritage Open Day tours in 2011 and 2012 (Lindo, 2011; News Letter, 2013).

Raphael Samuel who has written that "history, in the hands of a professional historian, is bound to present itself as an esoteric form of knowledge" (Samuel, 1994: 3).

We were not interested in obtaining a guided tour or in being led through the experience of the Maze. Rather, we were interested in undertaking a visceral reading of the site, guided by the feelings that emerged on the course of an *unguided* tour (Sontag, 1977). Our actions can perhaps best be situated within, what is at this point, an emergent global subculture known as urban exploration (see Ninjalicious, 2005; Garrett, 2013a; Gates, 2013). Urban exploration is perhaps better described as recreational trespass: its practitioners sneak into forbidden, forgotten or otherwise off-limits places for any number of reasons, not least of which is 'locating sites of haunted memory, seeking interaction with the ghosts of lives lived' (Garrett, 2013a: 30). Such places typically include 'derelict industrial sites, closed hospitals, abandoned military installations, sewer and storm drain networks, transportation and utility systems, shuttered businesses, foreclosed estates, mines, construction sites, cranes, bridges and bunkers' (Garrett, 2013a: 21). And, sometimes, abandoned prisons.

Our own motivations for exploring the Maze, and those behind urban exploration more generally, are various and diverse: personal (and, in our case, academic) curiosity, architectural and historical geekery, thrill-seeking, one-upmanship, the list goes on. However, at its core, urban explorers' search for exceptional places is driven by a yearning for genuine adventure and a desire for self-affirmation – the opportunities for which are increasingly denied to us under the drudgery of late capitalism. By directly immersing themselves in the sights, sounds, smells and textures of forbidden spaces, and 'filling them with imagination', urban explorers recode these

sites as realms of possibility, and forge deep and personal connections with them (Garrett, 2013a: 188). Having spent the previous day in HMP Belfast, also known as Crumlin Road Gaol, being led on a tour filled with life-size mannequins and into a giftshop where we were offered plastic truncheons and tickets to a boy-band tribute show playing on the grounds the next month, we felt somewhat uncomfortable with the commercialisation of incarceration.[7] Our response, to tour the Maze ourselves, was in this context, perfectly reasonable, understandable and, most importantly, respectful.

That exploring the Maze might comprise autoethnographic "data" for a criminological journal article was, to be frank, an afterthought. Considering our actions in this light, however, we wish to offer two retrospective thoughts on urban exploration *as a research method*. First, it is our contention that our *autoethnographic* trespassing in the Maze may be considered an instance of what Jeff Ferrell has elsewhere described as 'post-methodological criminology': 'a criminology that has moved beyond method as a formal procedure and toward more fluid, holistic, and personal forms of inquiry' (2012: 227; see Ferrell, 2009). Second, we urge criminologists to consider the potential of urban wandering, exploration and infiltration, in its various forms, as immersive spatial research methods,[8] capable of producing a Geertzian (1973) 'thick description' of place, or what William Least Heat-Moon (1991) has termed 'deep mapping'. [9]

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[7] Feel free to make your own judgment on the tastefulness of the product on offer at the Crumlin Road Gaol: http://www.crumlinroadgaol.com/ (accessed 20th October 2014).

[8] It is interesting at this juncture to invoke the writing of the Situationists on what they termed "psychogeography" (see Coverley, 2006 and Sadler, 1998 for general introductions).

[9] While we are not suggesting this article is in any way a deep map of maze, we contend that the angle of our methodological approach here was appropriate to begin such work, working from where feet hit pavement and then up, rather than coming to the site armed with an array of preconceived notions, expectations and biases.

This being said, in any theoretical discussion of the space of 'the prison', engaging Michel Foucault is unavoidable. Foucault's discussion of the panopticon in *Discipline and Punish* undoubtedly constitutes a central reference point in penal studies. However, it is Foucault's (1986) notion of heterotopia that interests us in the context of the Maze and our uninvited 'infiltration' of the site (Garrett, 2013b). Heterotopias, literally "other places", are for Foucault, places that exist (unlike utopias), but that somehow disrupt, undermine or challenge existing spatial orderings. Foucault's writing on heterotopias presents us with a series of brief, ambiguous (and at times contradictory) sketches. As a result, the variety of applications of the concept have been bewilderingly diverse: gated communities, museums, Chinatown and the 'space' of pornography have all been described, at one time or another, as heterotopic spaces (see Johnson, 2013). For Foucault, heterotopias have six defining characteristics:

1. They are transcultural

2. They may be reappropriated

3. They often juxtapose multiple spaces in one place

4. They are linked to slices of time (heterochronies)

5. They are spaces of isolation and exclusion

6. They function in relation to other spaces

We are interested here in addressing the three characteristics we find most fertile in relation to the Maze: the space is 'simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted' (Foucault 1986: 3, principle 3); is 'at a sort of absolute break with… traditional time' (Foucault 1986: 6, principle 4); and is 'outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate [its] location in

reality' (Foucault 1986: 4, principle 5). The Maze is an archetypally heterotopic space and our experience of exploring the Maze can equally be described as such.

Figure 6

Figure 7

4. Many places in one space

In the myth of Daedelus, the architect of the minotaur's Labyrinth on the island of Crete, all things deviate from the straight line (Latour, 2003: 156). Equally, once inside the Maze, we were headed in no clear direction – there was no predetermined path to follow. As we walked from block to block, taking in the hospital, the surveillance control room, the chapel and the kitchens, the sun crested the horizon and painted the Northern Irish sky with stunning pinks and purples. We could not have asked for a better morning to take photos and there was almost a sense of regret upon entering buildings, leaving the subtle glow outside, dulled by encrusted glass. Whether inside or out, however, we felt sheltered. No one was opening those prison gates. No one knew we were here. We were off the map. It was with this awareness that we circled into the labyrinthian architecture. Gates opened to yards where we found gates inside gates. Areas that appeared inaccessible, fences threaded tightly, were puzzles solved by climbing the watchtowers and looking down on the prison, the view of guards and snipers who no longer occupied these spaces. Moving between the spaces of the authorities and the spaces of the prisoners, the political

gravitas of *where* we were, what had happened here, what it meant and to whom, started to sink in.

For Foucault, '[t]he heterotopia is capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible' (1986: 6). It was not only the conflicting histories we were negotiating here of course, it was also our multiple and sometimes conflicting identities as explorers, researchers and non-Irish 'foreigners', amongst other things, that sparked imaginations of other scenarios, other associations, other places, other people. Negotiating this weave was exhausting. The Maze has been invested with numerous conflicting place-making 'myths': irreconcilable and opposing narratives of the conflict from both sides of the war. And more. These conflicts are portrayed a few miles away in Belfast and Derry, republican murals depicting and lionizing the 1981 hunger strikers and blanketmen. These murals, and the particular version of history they represent, have at times been symbolically contested; vandalised by dissident republicans or members of the British Army (see, for example, Sluka, 1992; Derry Journal, 2010). At other times, they are literally whitewashed by the State, a blunt attempt to efface a troubled past (see, for example, Rutherford, 2014).

Buildings, however, are harder to erase than murals. For almost a decade after the 1998 Good Friday agreement and the release of its paramilitary prisoners, the Maze stood still in anticipation of renewed hostilities and its potential reuse in a state of suspended animation. Beginning in 2006, however, almost the entirety of the vast 360-acre compound was demolished (Wylie 2008). Now only a fraction of the labyrinthine complex remains: H6, the prison hospital where ten republican hunger strikers died in 1981, an emergency control room, a chapel, and a handful

of administrative buildings – a kind of scale model of the original site. In 2010, plans were announced for a peace centre to be built on the Maze site (Batty and McDonald, 2010). [10] However, the proposal was surrounded by bitter controversy and in 2013, Northern Ireland's First Minister vetoed the plans – including the continued preservation of the remaining H-block and hospital – and financial backing was withdrawn.

Many unionists insist that what remains of the prison should be demolished, and that if preserved, it will become a 'shrine to terrorism'. What remains of the prison buildings has been granted 'listed' status and this is a source of anger, despite its enclosure behind 17-foot concrete walls. On the other hand, republicans stress that the site is of immeasurable historical importance and should be preserved as a testament to Ireland's troubled past – to do otherwise would be to whitewash history. Consequently, any resolution in the near future seems unlikely: it is difficult to imagine a compromise whereby both sides' contradictory narratives of the conflict could be incorporated to everyone's satisfaction. And so the Maze, for now at least, occupies a kind of twilight zone between the conflicting narratives of its past and an indeterminate future.

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[10] Prior to this proposal, there have been two masterplans for the redevelopment of the site (2005, 2006), which have tried and failed to reconcile the incompatible desire of the unionist community for Maze's demolition and the nationalist community's desire for its retention (McAtackney, 2014). 'With each lurching political crisis and change of government minister the theoretical fate of the site has continually altered' (McAtackney, 2014: 323). The most contentious proposal concerned the establishment of an International Centre for Conflict Transformation (ICCT) – a compromise between Sinn Féin's advocacy of a museum at the site, and unionist calls for the demolition of the remaining buildings (Graham and McDowell, 2007). The centrepiece proposal in the Maze Consultation Panel's (2005) report, however, was a multi-purpose sports stadium, intended – perhaps somewhat naively – to enrol 'popular culture to bring together an essentially divided people' (Graham and Dowell, 2007: 349). However, this proposal was, again, fraught with moral and ethical complications: locating a sports stadium, along with hotels and residential apartments, on one of *the* most controversial and dark sides of the conflict, was seen by many as distasteful (see Graham and Dowell, 2007).

Figure 8

Figure 9

5. Slices of Time

The Maze was still very much a maze and getting to the last remaining H-Block on the site proved challenging. It began to feel like a game, solving this puzzle – until we entered the H-Block itself. Inside, the air was thick with dark memories. On the backs of doors, Red Hands of Ulster and the initials LVF (Loyalist Volunteer Force) could be found. On the front of each door, the names of prisoners.

'Heterotopias', for Foucault, 'are most often linked to slices in time' (1986: 6). Foucault gives museums as an example, but ruins are almost certainly another instance (DeSilvey and Edensor 2013). The Maze, as it currently stands, is in a state of limbo, somewhere between the two. Most obviously, the Maze is 'linked' to its years as a functioning prison; its history of protests, hunger strikes, sectarian violence between prisoners, and breakouts. The very materiality of the site bears testament to this. The prison walls – both in the popular imagination and in a very literal sense – are 'ingrained with three decades of terror' (Curran, 2013): the factional graffiti scratched into cell doors, banks of dull CCTV screens in the emergency control room, traces of human blood and excrement in the hospital.

However, Foucault also states that heterotopias are linked, 'for the sake of symmetry', to 'heterochronies' (1986: 6): *times of otherness*. This is evocative of Mark Fisher's reworking of Derrida's concept of hauntology and the notion of 'time out of joint'. 'Haunting', for Fisher, 'happens when a place is stained by time, or when a particular site becomes the site for *an encounter with broken time*' (Fisher 2012: 19, emphasis added).

The Maze occupies precisely this kind of temporal interstice: in abeyance between a dystopic, indeed horrific past, and a utopian future (the proposed peace centre). These conflicting temporal juxtapositions intersected, during our exploration, neither in its past nor future, but rather in the tension of the present between the two. However, the prison's present state is not just one of atemporal confusion – it is also, of course, a space of spatial exclusion. It is this process of exclusion, the desire to keep people out while it negotiates its too-rich past and future, that makes it such a fraught heterotopic and heterochronic space.

Figure 10

Figure 11

6. An Island

A dog barking in the distance somehow felt too near, suggesting perhaps security has seen our rope on the wall. Our bodies ached and our heads throbbed. We'd been up too long, we'd sensed too much. We were disoriented from negotiating the layers of the Maze. Our minds were overwhelmed from digging through the rubble of time. One of us suggested the dog was inside the walls. We ran. At the rope, we realised, with dismay, that our imagination of how the knots in the rope would work was a practical disaster. We attempted to climb and fell, one by one, sweating, bleeding hands sliding down wet, springing rope, the barking getting louder and closer. In an adrenaline fuelled panic, one last grab got hold of the top of the door and shaking arms *heaved* a dripping body to the top, ready to hoist. Straddling the boundary, the wall of the heterotopia, all too visible, leaving the safety of the prison to confront other people and the political turmoil of Belfast, the inversion seemed complete.

Where an active prison works, perhaps startlingly at first impression, as a space where disparate people are brought together, the ruin of Maze, rife with unreconciled political histories, is now an island of exclusion available to a select few who, like the previous custodians of the space, hold the keys exclusively. With this is mind, we might consider this space in the context of the competing futures proposed for it. If the building, which already has a listed status as a potential heritage icon, were to be turned into an active heritage site, with visitors being offered tours of the space, than perhaps like the Crumlin Road Courthouse just a few miles away, one would have the ability to browse a gift shop for insensitive jailhouse memorabilia.

Perhaps then, once the place has been locked into a particular slice of time, once the narrative of place has become firm and frozen, once access is simply a matter of having the money to pay the entrance fee, our heterotopia edges into homogeneity. But let us not forget that 'heterotopias always presuppose a system of opening and closing that both isolates them and makes them penetrable' (Foucault 1986: 7). Foucault implores us here not to fall victim to the illusion of the disappearance of the heterotopia. For if there is anything in particular to be learned from going over the walls and finding what we have not been offered, it's the certainty that there is always a heterotopia to be found. When bodies encounter space in real places, flesh to rope; cheek to camera, the possibilities for encounter and discovery are, in the end, too rich, too multiple, to be contained on any linear spectrum. It is that multivocality of place to which we wish to afford space.

Figure 12

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