Introduction

Rethinking Prisons and Patagonia

What follows is an examination of prison and place. It is as much about incarceration and enclosure as it is about geography and conceptions of nature.

The prison in question is the Ushuaia penal colony—penitentiary, which officially operated from 1902 to 1947. The place is the southern edge of Tierra del Fuego in the southernmost province of contemporary Argentine Patagonia. Tierra del Fuego’s main island (Isla Grande) is divided between Argentina and Chile, and throughout the period covered in this book it was a fledgling national territory—a political designation below that of a province where the Ushuaia prison marked Argentine soil near the Chilean border. Situated between the Martial Mountains and the Beagle Channel, the port town of Ushuaia was considered the farthest corner (el último rincón) of the nation, well beyond the Strait of Magellan that divided continental South America and the Tierra del Fuego archipelago. This distance from the national capital of Buenos Aires provided a kind of autonomy for the penal administration, making an ideal setting for a penal colony rooted in hard labor timber extraction. Geography mattered, but so too did the built environment. This was not an ad hoc penal colony or temporary labor camp, but rather a penitentiary of stone and iron, modeled on urban carceral forms that were coupled with scienticic forestry and economic development. The hybrid penitentiary—penal colony in Ushuaia, therefore, forged what engineers called an “open-door” carceral experiment erected as the nation’s second national penitentiary to reform recidivists in concert with environmental management. Through the eyes of penologists and foresters; politicians and political radicals; locals and tourists; and, perhaps most importantly, incarcerated individuals, this story recovers a complex web that is often reduced to a series of juxtapositions—a boundless wilderness and the most bounded of human institutions; a
penitentiary in the forest; a territorial capital on the edge of the periphery. It brings into relief how the southernmost corner of the Americas was more connected than its contemporary title of “the end of the world” would suggest. This is an exploration of a carceral ecology.

**DENATURALIZING THE “NATURAL PRISON”**

Ushuaia is closer to the Antarctic Peninsula than to Buenos Aires. Its landscape is dominated by glaciers and forests rather than the iconic cattle pastures and gently rolling wheat fields of the central Pampas. Because of its supposed isolation and subpolar geography, incarceration in Ushuaia was a kind of domestic exile—as a national territory rather than province, it seemingly functioned like the liminal penal colonies of European empires. These extreme physical geographies, be it a remote island or one just offshore, a barren expanse of tundra or desert, all have proven to be symbolic sites of
banishment, exile, and punishment. Understandably, and despite their variations, these landscapes have been reduced to “natural prisons.” Siberia, for example, was for tsarist Russia according to administrators in 1900, a “prison without walls.” Tropical and temperate islands such as French New Caledonia and Brazil’s Fernando de Noronha have been described euphemistically as “punishment in paradise” and “exile to paradise.” The penal colonies in French Guiana, often collapsed into the singular and evocative Devil’s Island, were infamously labeled the “dry guillotine.” British penal colonies in Australia and the Andaman Islands in the Indian Ocean wavered between fearful and preferred sites for convict transport. Little more than generalities tie together these examples from Russia, Brazil, the British and French Empires, and Argentina, though they reveal how pervasive the use of penal colonies removed from legal and population centers were in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Despite their different global locations and political affiliations, penal colonies were first and foremost geographical oddities and “strange dominions” within the narrative of civilizing empires and modernizing nation-states in their shift toward scientific penitentiaries.

*Natural prison*, as a descriptive term, fairly recognizes the roles of the environment (physical geography and climate as punishment) and distance (isolation and relocation as a legal barrier) as key to penal colony infrastructures. Banishment was a disorienting social and cultural experience, and escape proved nearly impossible. However, the analytical potential of the phrase places so much emphasis on the environment that inmates, even guards, become passive in their operations. Invariably, “nature” does all of the work. Not only is this a simplistic understanding of the worlds created in these spaces, but such an understanding ignores the ways in which engineers and penologists sometimes thought holistically about these institutions and their design. The mortal remoteness evoked by these categories are the result of erasures—of social connections, intellectual projects, economic networks, resource management, and ecological imaginaries.

We have not, in other words, interrogated what was so natural about these natural prisons. Let me provide just one example to situate Ushuaia within this trope.

Colonel Charles Wellington Furlong was born in Massachusetts in 1874. Before his thirtieth birthday he embarked on a trip to northern Africa, and three years later a lust for *terra incognita* guided him from Bolivia and Venezuela to southern Patagonia. Furlong’s goal was to be the first traveler from the United States to hunt alongside the indigenous communities of
Tierra del Fuego. In 1906 Furlong wrote to the prominent Braun-Menéndez family in Punta Arenas, Chile, to inquire about transportation options, the relative safety of traveling through the region, and the prospects of acquiring an English-speaking guide. The family informed Furlong that horseback was the only way to navigate the southern mountains, and that his guide would surely not venture beyond the hooves of his steed. This was the kind of difficulty for which Furlong and other explorers yearned. The following year, 1907, he departed New York City via steamship for Punta Arenas, Chile, where he then connected to Ushuaia. Furlong noted that the seemingly short leg between the city of Punta Arenas and the recently established Argentine town of Ushuaia offered a particular departure from civilization: “Over the seven thousand miles which separate Punta Arenas from New York, and you feel you are somewhat out of the world; but wind your way three hundred miles farther south and east through the intricate channel-ways of the Fuegian Archipelago, be dropped ashore at a lone penal colony of murderers and felons, and you are in truth at the very ends of the earth.” The “ends of the earth” were precisely what Furlong sought in Tierra del Fuego. A painting instructor at Cornell University, he endeavored to bring this far-flung region home through a number of original artworks that captured his adventure. Furlong did fulfill his desire to hunt alongside the Selk’nam (Ona), and the majority of his paintings focused on indigenous life.

Still, he could not help but portray the lonely Ushuaia penal colony, whose construction began in 1901. Depicted in one of these images is a single discernable inmate leading a cart and two oxen on a desolate shore under leaden skies (figure 1). In his field journal Furlong noted that inmate labor was employed to build the town’s roads and the faintly pictured telegraph lines that seemingly led to nowhere. With few guards to watch over them, inmates roamed the shores with relative freedom in these early years. Writing for Harper’s Monthly he concluded, “Without man’s agencies, Ushuaia itself is imprisoned: behind, the impassable barrier of jagged peaks with their perpetual snows; in front, the limitless gale-swept channelways; beyond, to the south, the Antarctic Ocean.”

Furlong’s painting, which complemented his numerous publications quite well, was drafted from a photograph he had taken in 1907 (figure 2). Comparing the two images, the painting now housed at the Smithsonian, the photograph buried in an archival box in New Hampshire, it becomes clear that Furlong painted out one of the most powerful of “man’s agencies” in the photograph: a steamship, plus a second inmate engaging with a uniformed

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Figure 1. *Argentine Convict with Ox Team*, Charles Wellington Furlong, 1908, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Renwick Gallery.

Figure 2. *Convict at Work for the Government Prison, Ushuaia*, Charles Wellington Furlong, 1907, Baker Library, Dartmouth College, MSS 197 VIII-47.
officer between the ox-cart and the pier. This alteration gave the impression that Ushuaia was more desolate and remote than the photograph had captured, therefore giving credence to Furlong’s claim that Ushuaia was at the very ends of the earth.⁹

The photograph is one of overexposure, both literally and figuratively, such that Furlong paints in a darkened sky and omits human technologies and connections. Indeed, visible in the photograph is the Argentine flag waving on the vessel’s stern. Aware of these implications, Furlong would write in his notes that two human endeavors had the greatest effect on the region of Fuegia: first, the positive economic impact of the steamship; and second, the likely sapping of that same economy, which would be wrought by the Panama Canal’s redirecting of transoceanic shipping through the Panamanian Isthmus rather than the straits of Tierra del Fuego. The painting erased the creeping advance of a modernizing world on a native and wild corner of the globe. Such a depiction framed the “natural prison” as “the ends of the earth” and vice versa.

By shining light on such erasures we can recover how these situated spaces—distant as they may have been from cosmopolitan capitals—were also transnational touch points linked to intellectual and infrastructural networks, including the knowledges gained and labors displayed by those interned. Ushuaia’s demographic, though small, was a combination of state bureaucrats, urban inmates, immigrants, indigenous communities, and scientists from around the world, entangled by the global projects of penal colonization, state-formation, and research in the natural sciences.¹⁰ The “farthest corner” of the Argentine nation was a microcosm, a patria chica in (domestic) exile.

**PATAGONIA AND LANDSCAPES OF THE IMAGINATION**

The name *Patagonia* has purchase. While Ushuaia fit the role of a natural prison, traveler narratives over the centuries have turned the greater region into a “landscape of the imagination.”¹¹ Today, advertisements of thrill seekers in Gor-Tex and other magical fabrics sell readers on the unknown, the untamed, the far corners, peaks, and crevasses of the earth. Contemporary travelers frame these images in Instagram accounts, wearing the logo of the famed eponymous lifestyle brand in the landscape itself.¹² For two years I lived in Chattanooga, Tennessee, where one can buy bumper stickers that read “Chattagonia.” The subsequent two years I taught at Princeton University,
where students wear sweatshirts that bear the logo, “Princetagonia,” in which the campus towers replace the granite spires of Mount Fitz Roy famously used for the clothing brand logo. Patagonia is one of the few regional place-names that is known the world over and pronounced without translation in multiple languages. But it is often reduced to a lifestyle rather than a region of many landscapes with equally many social histories.

In this way, carceral ecology holds figurative power, as it captures the way in which Patagonia and “the end of the world” have been confined by a limited, even myopic, mental geography. But it is often reduced to a lifestyle rather than a region of many landscapes with equally many social histories.

Exploring areas outside of Buenos Aires in Argentina is often categorized as studying the “interior,” but Patagonia does not figure neatly into this already problematic dichotomy of city/country. The region today which covers roughly one-third of the country, is divided into five provinces (Neuquén, Río Negro, Chubut, Santa Cruz, and Tierra del Fuego), though its first limited governmental powers were granted in 1878. Scholars have recently questioned, however, whether it makes sense to discuss Patagonia in the national histories of Chile and Argentina prior to the early twentieth century. Rather than trying to capture all of Patagonia, this study is largely limited to one corner of the region in the subpolar forest on the Argentine-Chilean border in Tierra del Fuego. In no way can this region stand in for the whole. In fact, it has generally stood as outside of the rest of Argentine Patagonia—the periphery of the periphery. This comparatively small stretch of the Beagle Channel, where the Andean mountains shift their prominent north-south orientation to an east-west orientation, is supposedly the most inhospitable territory of Argentina. According to Charles Darwin, famed naturalist aboard the HMS Beagle in the 1830s, for which the channel is named, the region was where the world’s most abject indigenous peoples were “living fossils” that failed to evolve in a landscape defined by “death and decay.”

To unthink the landscape of the imagination, therefore, Patagonia must be thought of in the plural—both regarding ecosystems and human projects. Hugh Raffles, as a point of departure, has sought to complicate any singular image of a biodiverse expanse such as the Amazon, which he argues, resists abstraction. Argentine Patagonia, by comparison, is characterized as an empty, monotonous, windswept prehistoric landscape—an arid desert east that must be traversed to reach the splendor of the Andean mountain west. At least that is the narrative that informs our visual lexicon forged by traveler accounts. If the Amazon is an overwhelming living labyrinth,
Patagonia is a static horizon and petrified mountainscape. Literary scholars have cogently deconstructed the numerous and strikingly consistent representations of Patagonia produced by European and North American, as well as South American explorers. However, these scholars’ tendency to focus on (and through) the “imperial eyes” of renowned explorers and naturalists rarely offers us alternative visions of the region. While a growing body of literature has unpacked indigenous practices and knowledge in the region to counter Eurocentric conceptions of expertise, inmates have been overlooked as actors and agents, let alone experts in any sense of the word. Their many years in the region developed a “situated-knowledge” that not only warrants analysis, but challenges the authority so frequently read into explorers who often spent very little time in Tierra del Fuego, yet were all too ready to tell its “truths.”

Travelers sought Patagonia, envisioning the region before their arrival, then enclosing and constructing the landscape for their return home. Inmates, on the other hand, did not seek Patagonia and saw nothing romantic about life in a supposed natural prison. They were forcibly sent there and sometimes denied a return—many assumed that exile would be their death. Reappraising the landscape and prison environment through the writings of inmates expands our understanding of Tierra del Fuego and a carceral experience that was, on the one hand, quite common with regard to modern penitentiaries, but also particular with regard to geography and localized operations. To this end, the natural prison and landscape of the imagination must be reevaluated in relation to one another, entangling global processes within a deeply Argentine history.

FROM THE PANOPTICON BACK TO THE PENITENTIARY

While Patagonia and natural prisons have long piqued the popular imagination, so too has the modern penitentiary. These institutions introduced liberal and scientific approaches to criminal rehabilitation and punishment, forming their own particular landscape—or built environment—of the imagination. Penitentiaries were constructed in London, Paris, and beyond, beginning in the early nineteenth century. They followed similar radial architectures, featuring a central rotunda from which emanated pavilions that for the first time contained individual cells and modern amenities. These architectural wonders, often set behind domineering exterior walls, were
consumed by renowned audiences. They inspired some of the earliest prison tourism through figures such as Alexis de Tocqueville and Charles Dickens, who measured the architectural design and prison protocol against Enlightenment ideals. Eastern State Penitentiary in Philadelphia, perhaps the most famous of these institutions, was reproduced in more than three hundred locations on five different continents, including the national penitentiaries in Buenos Aires and Ushuaia. It became a focal point for architecture students and the history of design. Figure 3 outlines plans for Ushuaia’s expansion to a full eight-cellblock radial prison. These plans were not realized, nor was the exterior wall, and the prison instead remained with five pavilions and a barbed-wire fence until its closure. Still, plans like these can be found in archives around the world.

Given the near ubiquity of their layout, these institutions have been rendered inherently placeless, such that omnipresent power could be exercised within the seemingly hermetically sealed walls of any penitentiary. They were, as Erving Goffman theorized, “total institutions” in which an entire world