

6.5 Minutes With... Transcript
Stephanie Gibson
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Nicole Welk-Joerger: You're listening to 6.5 Minutes with C21 – an audio introduction to the topics, experts, and leaders who take part in the conversations hosted by the Center for 21st Century Studies.

I'm Nicole Welk-Joerger, Deputy Director of the Center and the interviewer in this episode. Before our Weaponizing Loneliness Roundtable conversation on May 6th, I spoke with Stephanie Gibson, PhD candidate at the University of Pennsylvania who looks at the history of incarceration and the efforts of prisons-turned-monuments in telling traumatic stories.

Your dissertation, it focuses on “monuments of trauma.” Can you explain how you got interested in this particular topic?

Stephanie Gibson: I have always been interested in the intersection of art and politics. That's what I was studying in my undergrad and then, when I was kind of entering into the work force, I interned at the Bermuda National Gallery, and I was still very interested in how art affects lives, specifically our political lives, which for me is all life. And then I became extremely interested in exploring architecture and space more deeply and I was fascinated with monuments, because they are one of the main ways that we tell our stories to ourselves and to generations to come.

I think, when you enter like even when you walk outside I think many of us pass by monuments, every day, and we don't realize how we are absorbing those stories, as we go about our daily lives. That's why I'm so interested in in what monuments are erected and which ones aren't.

During the 2020 uprisings in the United States, we saw how people were challenging the, accepted history and pushing back against that. And that's something that I'm extremely interested in: is how marginalized groups, oppressed groups can challenge our historical landscape by erecting monuments that tell our true stories and toppling monuments that tell our falsified histories.

Nicole: Your dissertation is broken up into case studies. Each chapter relates to a case study, and one of your case studies is the Eastern State Penitentiary. So I wanted to ask, that particular case study on the eastern state penitentiary looks at how the now historic site talks about incarceration and solitary confinement. So what's their approach and how do you talk about that approach in your research?

Stephanie: The whole purpose when it was built originally in 1829 was to create a space where people would be penitent for the crimes that they committed. And so, to do

that they would work, sleep, live, exercise in solitary confinement. It was one of, it was the first place that I had been that 100% solitary confinement was used.

I think something that is really profound about how committed the original commissioners of Eastern State Penitentiary were the whole idea of solitary confinement and not having any contact with anybody else, was the fact that they would put like hoods over the incarcerated people, so that they wouldn't see anyone as they walked into their cell. So that there was literally no contact with the outside world. So, if they had to go to like the infirmary they would be, have a hood on taken to the infirmary and then brought back guaranteeing complete separation and isolation which, I think really hits home how dedicated they were to this idea of isolated living would be the best mode of rehabilitation, which I think is just really devastating.

So, what the historical site is doing now is, encouraging visitors to question the state of the American criminal justice system today. And they're creating a space for visitors to and to create to open it up for visitors to have a dialogue about the American criminal justice system.

What I do is a is I explore how they're how they're achieving that mission through architectural techniques that they use. So I'm looking at the way they are leveraging that space, the space of extreme trauma and distress and using the architecture to encourage visitors to question their preconceived notions about what prisons are for, what the current American criminal justice system is doing.

Nicole: So what are some important takeaways, we should consider when studying this topic from a historical perspective?

Stephanie: Well, I look at other sites of trauma that are not that are not former prison sites but it also just so happens those three of the five sites that I'm looking at our former prison sites. And I think that's because incarceration is extremely traumatic and ...actually you can even argue that four out of five our former prison sites. I'm also looking at the Door of No Return in Senegal that's used to imprison enslaved Africans. I think this idea of captivity and confinement and imprisonment is extremely traumatic it is, it was a method of torture. And I think that's kind of weaved throughout my work is this idea of, of abolition because imprisonment and incarceration is a form of trauma. And in looking at these sites and in looking at the trauma that was inflicted on, on people, specifically. Africa and its diaspora, and looking at how these sites that are painful can be used to highlight these terrible things that happened to us and also as a form of repair and preparatory work.

Incarceration is separation period. Even if you are not sitting in a cell by yourself. We are separating people from their families, from their friends, from their loved ones, from the community, and then from society in general. By looking at these sites and looking at how punishment has and incarceration has progressed, we can kind of see what, what we did wrong and how we can move forward.

Nicole: To further engage with this interview, other conversations, and the participatory research and reading activities for *Lonely No More*, please visit our website at uwm.edu/c21. If not there, we hope to catch you when you have another 6.5 Minutes to spare.