

Cornell Institute of Archaeological and Material Studies (CIAMS)

Workshop, Wednesday, Feb 12th, 4:30pm. Landscapes and Objects Lab (125 McGraw)

“Denuding Surveillance at the Carceral Boundary”
Chris Garces

Department of Anthropology
Faculty Fellow, Cornell Society for the Humanities
Cornell University



The planetary-wide, banal growth of fortress architecture may distract us from the equally mundane, bureaucratically militarized function of such walls themselves: to guide all traffic in arms, drugs, money, and bodies through site-specific gatekeeping procedures. In this workshop/conversation, I will share some ideas and invite discussion about my ethnographic “rites of passage,” studying checkpoint filters in a maximum security prison in Guayaquil, Ecuador. Specifically, I problematize the material dynamics produced by a tragic breach in prison security when a gun was stolen into the complex and a powerful, cartel-affiliated prisoner was shot and wounded. For an all-too-brief moment, Ecuadorian prison checkpoint technologies—their public secrets and material relations of population governance—were openly discussed. The checkpoint strip search, in effect, has become a mandatory routine for all subjects who move across carceral thresholds. Yet few discuss it, for understandable reasons. What I call “denuding surveillance,” in which professional guard duties require voyeuristically invasive digital, physical, or visual surveillance, while disavowing any sexual content in the same procedure, has proliferated as a form of power—and not just in Ecuador. And not just in prisons. As a ritual zone of state security clearance, the checkpoint legally must be crossed. The unconscious affect of relief produced by traversing such spaces of violation is shared equally between those harassed and let go, and those whose passage occurs without incident. Any sentiment of relief generated by the checkpoint, however, now runs parallel to the aesthetic and gender normalization of the security state itself.

(Pre-circulated paper currently in press at *South Atlantic Quarterly*)