

8-2019

The Prisoner as Object: Rhetorical Agency and the Literacy of Prison Tattooing

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THE PRISONER AS OBJECT: RHETORICAL AGENCY
AND THE LITERACY OF PRISON TATTOOING

A Thesis

by

REBECCA R. REYES

Submitted to the Graduate College of
The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

August 2019

Major Subject: Rhetoric, Composition, and Literacy

THE PRISONER AS OBJECT: RHETORICAL AGENCY
AND THE LITERACY OF PRISON TATTOOING

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August 2019

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ABSTRACT

Reyes, Rebecca R., The Prisoner as Object: Rhetorical Agency and the Literacy of Prison Tattooing. Master of Arts (MA), August, 2019, 99 pp., 24 figures, references, 41 titles.

Prison is an environment by which man is no longer a man. In an institution designed to limit the agency of incarcerated individuals, a literacy event has unfolded through the rhetorical practice of prison tattooing that allows individuals to re/gain their agency. Tattoos allow for the incarcerated, who are seen as state property, to break down the dehumanizing assemblage that has been created. The body, now an object, becomes a site for rhetorical communication where an emergent agency develops within the relationship of all intra-acting factors. I analyze and build upon ambient rhetoric, visual rhetoric, *Kairos*, and counternarratives to understand the humanizing literacy event that has unfolded, interviewing three formerly incarcerated men to gain an insider understanding of a rhetorical tool used by an exclusive group of individuals.

DEDICATION

The completion of my master's thesis is dedicated to my parents, Ramiro and Bertha Reyes, who always encouraged the pursuit of a higher education. Your constant love and support kept me on the right path toward a better life. Thank you for always believing in me.

Arlaeé Guevara, without you, I would have given up long ago. You motivated me when I needed it the most. Through my procrastination, deadlines, stress, and lowest moments, you were always there. Everything you have done for me has contributed to my success. I am forever grateful.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my committee chair, Maggie Shelledy, for introducing me to rhetorical theories that strongly guided my work on my thesis. Your unique perspective opened up my eyes and helped me to think more analytically about the way I see the world. You gave me the push I needed to complete my thesis.

I would also like to thank my committee member, Randall Monty. Your classes taught me so much about rhetoric, the world, and myself. I never felt more challenged and engaged than when I was in your class. Thank you for encouraging me to pursue the writing of my thesis. Without you, I would not have had the confidence to aim so high in my academic career.

Thank you to Alyssa Cavazos. Your class was the only one during my undergraduate career that I felt I earned my grade. You challenged me to understand what hard work meant. In my graduate career, your class brought back a motivation and love for learning that I had lost. I can never repay you for that.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

I never knew my uncle. I had met him a few times, but I never *really* knew him. All I have is the faint memory of a one-eyed man who always wore sunglasses; it didn't matter if the sun was actually out. The smell of cigarettes always on his breath with a slight hint of mint that was never strong enough to hide it. A cologne that I have never smelled on any other man but him. His body was branded with images of daggers, *calaveras*, demons, and other symbols that made him look like a villain. From what my mother told me, I knew that he had been in prison before and that she did not want us to have any relationship with him at all.

Thus, the only encounters I had with my uncle were when he would come to my house unannounced, say hello, and then leave after my mother kicked him out. That is how it was until 2001, the night after Christmas, when I woke up to the pained cries of my mother at three in the morning. My uncle had died—shot multiple times. We went to his funeral where I met my cousins for the first time. I stayed by his casket for a long time looking at a man that I would never get the chance to know. Standing above his body, there was something that intrigued me about him and continued to do so for years to come.

It was not until the summer of 2009, eight years after his death, that I finally began to get to know my uncle. My family and I had moved into a new home. During the process of packing and unpacking, I came across a large, manilla envelope with my uncle's name written on the corner. Crammed with letters sent from prisons in Texas and Florida, I began sifting through its

contents. I wanted to read them. I wanted to get an idea of who my uncle was. Since my mother had always kept that part of our family distant, I hid in my room to read each one.

I think the reason why I remember this moment so clearly is because it was a moment of genuine shock. The content of each of his letters was intelligent. His words were deep, meaningful, and self-aware. His use of language was poetic and his vocabulary high. I did not know what I was expecting to find when I read his letters, but it was not this. Fast-forward ten years later and I have finally come to understand the reason for my shock. All I knew of my uncle was that he was in prison. That knowledge shaped the way I thought about him until I read those letters. Because he was in prison, I expected him to be uneducated. Because of my preconceived notions of what it meant to be incarcerated, I let myself believe that this man was less than a man. Having known nothing other than his being in prison, why had I made such assumptions about him? What was it that led me there?

During the beginning of my graduate career, I asked my mother more about him. She told me that the reason she did not want us to be associated with him was because he was the head of a chapter of a very dangerous gang. The men that killed him were his fellow members. She expressed with sadness the experiences in both their lives that led him there. He was one of the smartest in his class. However, with a father that was abusive, negligent, and never around, the only way he had to find some way to support his four sisters. He turned to drug dealing and found fathers and brothers in the gang life. He lost an eye in a fight between rivals. Tattoos covering his arms, chest, back, and neck detailed his gang life. Always in and out of prison, he lost his family. My mother told me that it always seemed like he preferred to be in prison than in the real world. That was something that I could never understand. As I became more and more interested in my

uncle's life, I started to ask myself so many questions. However, the question that I always came back to was: how had he survived?

The misconceptions of a society are passed on to those who do not choose to learn the truth for themselves. That is what had happened with me. Now, as I have become more self-aware of my own faults in thinking, I have begun to rewrite a history that I had created for my uncle. However, rewriting one history is not enough. There are countless of individuals formerly and currently incarcerated whose stories are never told, whose lives are diluted to statistics, and whose characters are seen as similar to my uncle's: uneducated and dangerous. In this thesis, I hope to extend upon my findings and give to others what my uncle's letters have given to me: an opportunity to discover the truth of those who are marginalized and ignored, and how those same individuals have attempted to re/discover their identities. Through interviews with three formerly incarcerated men, I analyze how ambient rhetoric has been used as a rhetorical tool by the state—lawmakers and prison architects—to isolate the incarcerated from the rest of humanity, consequently, creating a distance and ambience that dehumanizes these individuals into objects of punishment. I analyze how the incarcerated have used *kairos* to employ a visual rhetoric that has disrupted the prison institution, creating a humanizing literacy event that acts as a counternarrative for the incarcerated as it circulates amongst the prison environment and, later, the outside—society.

Prisons are filled with incarcerated men and women who have rarely been given a chance to speak for themselves. Our pre-conceived ideas and the sociopolitical factors that come with the prison have kept many of us, including me, from understanding that those in prison are complex individuals with a complex way of surviving in a place that has been historically designed to exclude these individuals from the rest of society. Focusing on the art of tattooing, I

aim to answer the question: How is the mainstream practice of tattooing used as a literacy tool by the incarcerated to foster the re/creation of identity and respect within the prison so that the dehumanizing assemblage is redesigned for survival?

Breaking Through Barriers: Rhetoric, The Prison, and The Individual

Four brick walls—that is all it takes to make a human being into something less. Four brick walls are able to strip individuals of respect when shifting from one society into another—prison. As an outsider of the prison environment, I seek to gain an insider understanding of the agency that embodies every aspect of the prison setting. From the walls to the bodies of those inside, from a system constructed centuries ago to now, how is it that a non-human construction can contain so much power in the lives of millions of human beings? How is that a non-human construction can silence an individual into inferiority? The inseparable sociopolitical factors that have now become part of the prison and what the production of that building means are active agents in the dehumanization of incarcerated persons.

The prison system is considered so “natural” in our lives that it is very difficult to imagine abolishing it completely. It has become difficult to envision a social order without the sequestering of individuals convicted of crimes, without taking the convicted away from their families, and placing them in an environment that will surely keep the “innocent” safe. Angela Y. Davis explains, “We...think about imprisonment as a fate reserved for others, a fate reserved for the ‘evildoers’” (16). The incarcerated are the “evildoers.” They are in prison for a reason. They broke the law and now deserve their punishment. They are criminals. Their identities are rarely associated with the falsely accused, family man, loving wife and mother, intelligent young (wo)man, or anything that could possibly describe you or me. That is why we cannot see the world without a penal system. The distance, physically and mentally, between those incarcerated

and those not is too far for many to truly step away from the mentality that those in prison are deserving offenders. Davis further explains, “There is reluctance to face the realities hidden within [prisons]. Thus, the prison is present in our lives and, at the same time, it is absent from our lives...afraid to face the realities they produce” (15). For so long, the prison institution has been known as a form of punishment for lawbreaking and as a safety measure set in place to protect those that have not committed crimes from those that have. However, the realities of the prison are far from what many would like to acknowledge. If made present and real to those not living within the prison walls, individuals would be forced to admit that human beings, governments they support, and morals that they have must be readjusted. Therefore, when incarcerated persons are treated inhumanely, some may look the other way and others may view that treatment as merited due to the actions that those individuals were convicted of. While we may not feel the atrocities that prisons bring upon the individual, the realities of life in prison are not absent to those living in them. How do the incarcerated retain some sense of self-respect and dignity when society has condemned them as individuals undeserving of such? I propose that, once in the prison context, an agency emerges within tattoos which allows the incarcerated who have been objectified to re/create their identity through these images on their skin.

In my thesis, I work mostly from Thomas Rickert’s description of what rhetoric and agency mean as humans try to understand and function in this world in order to re/create dwelling in an environment designed to limit and isolate individuals. Rickert states:

“Rhetoric accomplishes its work by inducing us to shift, at least potentially, how we dwell or see ourselves dwelling in the world. Rhetoric does not just change subjective states of mind; it transforms our fundamental disposition concerning how we are in the world, how we flourish (or try to flourish) in a place, or better,

how they come together in the continual making of a place; at the same time, that place is interwoven into the way they have come to be as they are—and as further disclosed through their dwelling practices” (xiii).

In other words, rhetoric shifts our manner of being, calling for some type of response. Through this transformation, rhetoric leads, many times, to action. In terms of agency, I argue that agency is not something that is reserved for a subject/object dichotomy. Instead, it is enmeshed and thriving in all beings—human and nonhuman. It is through complex relationships and interactions that agency emerges. Rhetoric is ambient. Everything around us and everything within us, over space and time, has been interwoven and continues to affect some part of our being.

My thesis contains three more chapters that each have their own specific function. The reformist lens that I take on the prison institution has been shaped much by the data that I collected through my primary research of IRB approved interviews with Guero, pronounced [wɛrɔ], Rey, and JJ. Guero is a 59-year-old family man. He was married for almost twenty years before separating with his wife. He has four daughters and one son. Guero loves to work with his hands. He takes pride in his small company that lays tiles for homes, factories, and businesses. He bragged to me about one celebrity home he had tiled before they became famous. On his own time, he also enjoys wood crafting. He even offered to make my husky a dog house. Although I declined, he insisted that the offer was on the table. Rey is the oldest son of four children at 29 years old. As the oldest, Rey has always felt the need to support his family, especially since his father passed away. Coming from a low socio-economic home, he knew that he had to do whatever was necessary to provide for his two sisters and brother. This meant joining a gang where he could easily make money to support those he loved. He told me that one thing he loves

to do is drive. Even if it is just in Texas, he said that there was something calming about being on the road. Rey has always enjoyed drawing and does not pretend to be humble about his work because he knows that it is very good. He even brags about tattooing most of his tattoos on himself. Once in prison, he developed that talent to become a very successful in-prison tattoo artist. JJ is a 36-year-old husband. JJ and his wife have struggled to have children but it is something that both of them strongly desire. Since he values family, he makes sure to take his wife along with him on all his work assignments. He enjoys hiking and debating about politics. All of these men have complex lives that have not been easy. With tragedies that have significantly affected the way they live their lives, they have maintained a positive outlook on life, understanding the necessity of empathizing with others. All three men were eager to share their stories with me, understanding that what they had to say could positively affect others that had been or are currently incarcerated.

All three of these men were Mexican-American and formerly incarcerated. They served in state prisons only in the United States and only in Texas. The interviews were conducted in person, recorded, and later transcribed. During the recruitment process, I provided each potential participant with an informed consent form. I also provided them with a consent form for permission of photographs to be taken of their tattoos. As I explained the process, I made sure to emphasize that this work would put these individuals in a position where they would be informing what I write and acting as co-producers of this thesis. I told them that I would do my best to understand the prison system through their experiences so that I could share their truths. Once consent forms were signed, interviews were arranged at a place of comfort for each individual and at their preferred time and date. During the interviews, I constantly reminded the participants that they had the liberty to stop the interview at any time, redact what information

had already been given, or refuse to be a part of the thesis completely. The pseudonyms of Guero, Rey, and JJ were given to each man to protect their identities. Guero spent seven years in prison, JJ spent nine months transferring between an aggravated and non-aggravated prison facility, and Rey spent almost seven years in high security and low security prisons. The following questions were asked to each participant: How long were you in prison? What kind of prisons did you serve your sentence in? Do you have any tattoos? What do they mean? Did your tattoos affect your prison sentence in any way? What was the hardest part of prison? Based on the answers given due to their personal experiences and where the conversation took us, questions were asked to some participants that may not have been asked of others. Two of the three participants agreed to allow for pictures to be taken of the tattoos they had, and the participants then explained the meanings of each tattoo, their purpose, and function within the prison setting. To protect the identity of the interviewee, faces were blotted out and other identifying markers, such as names, blurred.

After interviews were transcribed, I coded each of the answers under particular topic areas. Before the interviews, I had three topic points I knew I wanted to discuss: ambience, tattoos as a form of hierarchy creation, and tattoo artists utilizing *kairos*. Therefore, discussion that dealt with the physical environment and architecture were coded with Rickert's ambient rhetorical theory. However, upon the completion of my interviews, much more clarity about the prison institution and the dehumanizing behaviors exerted upon the incarcerated emerged. From that information, I analyzed the different ways that dehumanization occurred through ambience. New codes were then created as subcategories to ambience: solitary and dispossession. Dispossession, a social death, emerged upon the discussion of feelings of helplessness and a lack of autonomy. Discussion of the inhumane treatment that the formerly incarcerated experienced

as a result of the changing environment—outside to inside prison—were also coded in dispossession. Solitary confinement was one topic point that I had not thought of, yet its impact on the participants and our conversation about its effect on the mental state of its inhabitants gave me much more content to analyze through the lens of ambience. Solitary confinement has been used as an ambient rhetorical tool by the state, so any mention of its effects, experiences inside, or hate for it were coded accordingly. Through ambient rhetoric, I began my research knowing that the prison was an active agent in the way the incarcerated were treated. However, with Guero, JJ, and Rey as my co-producers, knowledge emerged that allowed for me to see the full extent by which ambient rhetoric has been used to dehumanize individuals within the prison. This led to the discovery of my term, *dehumanizing assemblage*—an assemblage in which humans are objectified through the rhetorical agency of various intra-acting factors.

Research I had done in the past helped me to understand how *kairos* had been used by a particular set of individuals within the prison setting—tattoo artists. Any mention of tattoo artists was coded accordingly. However, after analyzing the interviews, I realized that tattoo artists were not the only individuals utilizing *kairos*. It was in fact, all individuals participating in prison tattooing. Thus, I created one other code: dwelling. Through tattoos, the incarcerated were able to attune to their environment in order to create opportunities for familial bonds that are necessary for preserving humanity. These took shape, from the information provided in the interviews, primarily, in the form of gangs. Previously knowing that many gang tattoos were used as signifiers for ranking and power, I was curious to see if that hierarchy transferred once inside of the prison. Upon analyzing the interviews through Ralph Cintron’s idea of the conquering of the mainstream iconographies, I realized that tattoos have a language all their own. That is where my *humanizing literacy event* emerged from. These tattoos were not just a way to

identify different ranks of gang members, these tattoos were used as a rhetorical tool that developed into a form of literacy necessary for the survival of the self in multiple ways. Tattoos are a way for individuals to communicate past the suppressing nature of the prison. They restore the person's dignity, respect, and autonomy within the prison. Therefore, I created two new codes to reflect the analysis I had made: tattoos as a form of literacy and tattoos as a form of humanization.

Most of the transcript of the interviews were used because I wanted to ensure that the information so passionately given and the experiences lived were heard by more than just myself. The intensity by which these men spoke about their prison experiences led me to develop a strong desire for the reform of the prison institution. Because I understood these men as humans, I was able to feel some of the pain that they endured. I knew that I had to ensure that their experiences, words, and lives were being analyzed and written in a way that they would approve of. Rey, upon the conclusion of the interview invited, "Call me at any time. I want to make sure people are able to understand things from our side. It's ugly in there. I just want them to know. So anything you need, call or message." Therefore, as I navigated through my thesis and in cases in which I needed clarification, I double checked with the participants on information that needed more details and requested assurance that I could use their quotes and images.

In gathering data, I have collected images, quotes, and text from a variety of sources, including images and information within the Russian prison system. Although my own research is solely with Mexican American men in Texas, the Russian prison has shown to have many similarities to that of the US and Texas penal system. During the 189 years of Texas prison existence, there has been a serious neglect of the incarcerated individual's basic health and living

needs. For example, overcrowding is present and rising in Texas at an alarming rate. The United States Census Bureau statistics show that Texas penal populations are “multiplying at nearly twice the rate of the nation’s general population: 7.9 percent versus 4.3 percent between April 2000 and July 2004” (Brenchley and Goodale 29). With that, the justice system’s ability to meet basic needs such as food, water, and a bed to sleep on have proven difficult. This affects the physical and mental health of many individuals, as will be shown later in this thesis. In one research study conducted by Lauren Sharkey, a correlation between overcrowded prisons and an increased risk of suicide was found. Nine out of ten prisoners stated that their risk of suicide was largely affected by the living conditions of the prison because “overcrowding hinders the opportunities for staff to find out which prisoners are at risk of suicide” and “overcrowding makes it difficult for staff to provide support for ‘at risk’ prisoners” (Sharkey 117). Wherever the location, the conditions of the prison system have shown to be very similar and very detrimental to the overall being of the incarcerated. In addition, the use of tattoos as a literary and rhetorical device amongst the incarcerated in Russia show many similarities to the men that I interviewed. Similar meanings, types of tattoos, and rhetorical uses further demonstrates how language transcends time and space. Even in a culturally, historically, and socially different environment such as Russia, the power of language has proven to unlock the agency that individuals have potential for. In addition, it proves that images have a rhetorical strength and effect on the lives of the incarcerated. Whether in Texas or countries away, tattoos are a form of literary and rhetorical power that allow for the dispossessed to find a voice and dwelling in a system whose aim is to silence and isolate.

With the data, interviews, images, and scholarship collected, I developed my thesis into three more chapters. Chapter II introduces Thomas Rickert’s *Ambient Rhetoric* in order to set up

the foundation as to how the prison, in its design, architecture, construction, and mere existence, has an agency emerging from its being that situates the human in a position of inferiority.

Chapter II also aims to analyze the factors that make the environment so powerful and methods by which the incarcerated combat their loss of agency. Rickert argues, “An ambient rhetoric integrates the world itself as a necessary part of rhetorical work, making rhetorical theory as much about the world around us as it is about human being” (21). The focal point should not always be on the human, for the human is not the only agential force. Things—objects and the environment—each possess a potentiality to affect. In my thesis, I examine and argue how “things and environments have their own dark reserves and unique agencies” that become entangled in a situation and, from it, emerges agencies hidden to us before (Rickert 23).

Ambience is vital to incarcerated persons’ experiences within the prison as it heavily influences and shapes how and why their agency is warped and destroyed in this dehumanizing assemblage. Through my research, I have found that ambient rhetoric has been utilized by the state to limit an individual’s ability to function as a human being through isolation, sensory deprivation, and objectification.

Chapter III uses *kairos* as a theoretical frame to argue how incarcerated individuals utilize the dehumanizing environment around them to create an atmosphere by which their agency re/emerges, re/creating a dwelling place for themselves. I apply Thomas Rickert’s description of *kairos*, “conditions of possibility” and “attunement to a situation,” to argue that tattoos are used as a form of *kairos* to guarantee protection and create what Rickert calls a “dwelling” in a place meant to make individuals feel like objects (92 and 98). As tattoos and the environment become entangled, particular opportunities are created as agency emerges and circulates in an assemblage in which respect and power is contested. My thesis examines how

tattoos have acted and continue to act as an embodied rhetorical action that help the incarcerated attain/regain a voice when ambience has dehumanized their beings.

Furthermore, in using *kairos*, I focus on the ethnographic work, *Angels' Town* by Ralph Cintron. In this text, Cintron observes how groups of individuals, in situations and environments where little to no respect is being given, use a variety of everyday rhetorics to combat this lack of respect and re/create an identity to counter the one being made for them. Cintron examines “how humans ‘make’ an order” (x). While Cintron makes it clear that it is the human making this order and focuses primarily on how humans, specifically, create their own agency, it is important to keep in mind that this perceived “human” agency is created only through the complex nonhuman and human relationships that unfold in various situations. Referring back to Thomas Rickert, he does not aim to devalue the idea of human agency, but, rather, to acknowledge the value of nonhuman entities’ roles in creating/structuring this perceived human agency. Through Cintron’s ethnographic work, Rickert’s theories prove the significant affect that nonhuman factors play in everyday rhetorics. Latino community members in states of disrespect use *kairos* to create self-respect through non-human devices, practices, images, and literacies, all of which are mainstream but used for non-mainstream purposes. For example, Cintron, amongst the iconography, “interpret[s] the surfaces of public culture—hairstyles, clothing, car decoration, musical styles, talk, the geometries of city streets and street names—as performances, as rhetorical gestures emerging from the desire to persuade others of the propriety of certain identifications” (x-xi). Expanding upon Cintron’s work, I have researched how humans ‘make’ an order in an environment that already has an order set in place—the prison. My thesis shows how, through *kairos*, mainstream tattoos are used by the incarcerated to conquer the environment

and distribute power and agency to individuals whose purpose for being in the prison are to have power and agency taken away.

Chapter IV argues that tattooing in prisons is a literacy event that allows entities of the state to demand respect where little to none is given by utilizing many mainstream iconographies to create “a kind of symbolic conquering” as the formerly incarcerated “rise up from the obscure depths” to rename the prison with their own order (Cintron xiii). In addition to re/gaining agency, tattooing within the prison is an unfolding literacy event that breaks through the setting, giving prisoners an opportunity through ambience, *kairos*, and the nonhuman to write themselves into existence. It is an opportunity for individuals to have an address-ibility and response-ibility. This humanizing literacy event “offers a way for prisoners to (re)construct an identity as citizen” and “to piece together or repair the narrative of one’s life, and to resist the identity erasure carried out by incarceration” (Earle 51). With little opportunity for rhetorical argument, tattooing has given prisoners an avenue to “craft [their] enduring ‘les lieux de memoire’ [sites of memory]” through their branded bodies (Hasian and Frank 98). Thus, the incarcerated have created a means to tell the counterstory (Martinez 2014) to their own histories as they circulate through the prison and, after being released, the public.

Limitations

There are some limitations to my study. For one, all of my interviewees are Mexican-American men. Any application of my findings to other groups such as women or individuals of different races may prove to be problematic. Furthermore, all of the Mexican-American men served their sentences in state prisons in Texas. Out-of-state, county, federal, and other types of prisons are not being reflected from the interviews. In addition, I only conducted 3 interviews of formerly incarcerated men which does not allow for much comparison to the majority of those

having been or are currently incarcerated. The age gaps between the interviewees also may have affected their perspectives of the prison system. Rey and JJ went in when they were in their early 20s while Guero went in when he was much older. According to the interviews with Rey, the younger ones were usually treated rougher, so that may have impacted their prison experiences. Furthermore, the men all went to prison for different amounts of time. All in there for less than 7 years and transferred to multiple prisons, it was not possible to understand the experiences of one whom spent a substantial amount of years in one prison. The biggest limitation in my thesis and research comes from the praxis of what I am arguing against. As part of the requirement to protect the identity of my participants, I have had to remove identifying markers from images and use pseudonyms. My aim to have my participants be co-producers is limited by these factors. Trying to humanize these men becomes a challenge as their names and other identifying signifiers must be removed. In the parameters of what my thesis necessitates, I have had to perform in the deprivation of acknowledgement of the individuals who have made this thesis possible.

Although there are some limitations, my research has allowed for the discovery of a humanizing literacy event that embodies ambient rhetoric, *kairos*, and counternarratives. My research acts as an example of how various factors, human and nonhuman, intra-act in assemblages and create/suppress particular agencies, re/discovering what it means to be human and re/creating a dwelling place. As the humanizing literacy event of prison tattooing circulates, the counternarrative that it creates changes within each new environment. My thesis opens up an avenue by which other forms of humanizing literacy events that have emerged and have been sustained through ambience and *kairos* can provide a counternarrative for a marginalized group

of people or things to counter the hegemonic master narrative as they transform through space and time.

Humanizing the Dispossessed

One step toward humanizing individuals who have been entangled in the dehumanizing assemblage of prison begins in the language we use to describe them. One must remember that those who have served time or are still serving time are, above all else, human beings. These humans have experienced or are experiencing a forcible dispossession. By dispossession, I refer to “a universal primary dispossession whereby we are, from the start, outside of ourselves by way of our relations to others” (Earle 47). Formerly incarcerated individuals are immersed in a world of barriers and borders. Isolated from the outside, their social death does not end just because they are no longer incarcerated. Using terms such as “inmate,” “convict,” “felon,” and “prisoner” further isolate and build borders between the formerly/currently incarcerated and the outside world. Those terms are actively used as a means to dehumanize and deny individuals of an identity by guards. There is a face, a name, and person behind the label of “prisoner.” By using those terms, we are impeding our ability to see these individuals for what they are—humans. For that reason, in my thesis, I will refer to individuals who have been incarcerated as such: the formerly incarcerated or currently incarcerated. If I use any of the other terms, it is either because the text I am directly quoting is using this language or I must use this language to extend upon a point that I am making. I have made this language choice to advocate for the incarcerated and formerly incarcerated individuals who have expressed their desire to be called such.

One reason I chose to conduct interviews was to get a first-hand account of the prison experience from someone who actually experienced it. Having known very little about my uncle,

I wanted to make sure that the same did not happen to these men. I wanted to make certain that their stories were told. Moreover, I wanted to see the individuals I wrote about as people and not just words on a page. It would have been very easy to do a survey or write based off what others have written, but I wanted to humanize the focal point of my entire thesis. I wanted to interact with people and feel some of the anger and pain they experienced as they shared their stories. By doing this, Guero, Rey, and JJ found some sense of justice since they were given an opportunity to reveal the truths of the prison system, passionately hoping for even just one person to understand the realities of this punishment industry. However, the main reason I chose to conduct interviews was to push back against the objectifying and ignorant stereotyping of the incarcerated and formerly incarcerated. I offered these men an opportunity to be co-producers of a work that they felt was important. I offered them the opportunity to be active participants in and enter an environment that they may not have thought they could be a part of and to obliterate their image as the invisible other. This is necessary in redefining what it means to have intellectual value and merit. As scholars, it is important to recognize that there are marginalized individuals that stay marginalized because of their lack of access to merited streams of information. My thesis not only validates what these men had to share, but it is founded on the belief that the knowledge, rhetoric, and literacy that they have created is vital to understanding the ways in which human beings participate in assemblages, conquer their environments, and re/create their humanity.

Chris S. Earle describes the experience of the incarcerated as undergoing a “social death” within the prison system. This social death inhibits individuals’ ability to address, be addressed, and affect. Earle shares the experiences of the formerly incarcerated Nawal El Saadawi. Having lost her ability to affect the world with her words, she becomes frustrated. Her “loss of

rhetoricity” is a result of being cut off from the outside, and she laments that “she and the other prisoners are unable to respond to or defend themselves against the allegations” (Earle 59). Such is the case throughout history for the incarcerated. Narratives written by those from the outside and those on the inside unable to share their truths; those on the outside unwilling to listen. The public, which I use to refer to the groups of individuals who have discarded the lives of the incarcerated because of the long-held perspective that the incarcerated have an “intrinsicly criminal character,” have taken master narratives as fact (Foucault 100).

The men that I interviewed have experienced much of the same. Rey, in complete disbelief as I told him that our interview would be in a printed book in the university, shared his thoughts with a genuine smile: “Man! That’s something! My words and my tattoos in a book. I gotta see that when you’re done with this. That’s something. Can you get me a copy? I’ll carry that with me everywhere.” That is exactly what I have aimed to do with my thesis. I wanted the individuals not only to be part of the work I created but co-producers of this thesis. These men with intelligent thoughts and complex minds, who have had barriers to their ability to reach a wider audience, have given me the weight of much of this thesis. Their knowledge is informing my approach in a variety of ways: how I view each theory, how I put their words and experiences in synthesis with those theories, and how I view them and other incarcerated persons as human beings. With what they have given me, I hope to allow them a sort of border crossing— “connecting the (socially) dead with the living” (Earle 50). With every scholarly text that I reference and every claim I make, Guero, Rey, and JJ are right there. They are embedded into every word I have written. I put these men in a unique position where their words, their tattoos, and their stories allow us, on the outside, to “see the contradictions in dominant narratives, and thus, to launch revolutionary vernaculars and epistemological frames” (Earle 50).

My thesis provides a perspective of a very political topic from individuals who are normally not given the opportunity to speak. Through the words of Rey, Guero, and JJ, I have opened a pathway for men who never thought they would contribute their narratives to this field and hope for reform. Apart from understanding what makes a dehumanizing assemblage function and how humanizing literacy events can emerge within them, Rey, JJ, and Guero allowed for me to develop a deeper understanding of the effects that counternarratives can have. Although I knew that I wanted Rey, JJ, and Guero to be co-producers of my work, I had not yet realized until much writing had been done of my thesis that my work was acting as a counternarrative for these individuals. Not only that, but my work was acting as a counternarrative for all the formerly and currently incarcerated. Before the completion of my interviews and research, the prison institution, I knew, had many characteristics that I morally and ethically disagreed with. However, with even stronger conviction, I urge for reform. The prison is an environment that dehumanizes and destroys an individual. Although the incarcerated have found ways to use tattoos as a form of literacy and power, it is still not enough to counteract the mentally, physically, and emotionally disabling effects of its ambient rhetoric. Rey, Guero, and JJ have provided a counternarrative for the incarcerated. Their use of tattoos has countered the master narrative that the incarcerated do not have agency. Their use of tattoos has revealed how counternarratives take many shapes and forms and, with each changing environment, transform into various counternarratives that humanize the currently and formerly incarcerated.

CHAPTER II

WALLS OF CONFINEMENT: AMBIENCE OF A DEHUMANIZING ASSEMBLAGE

Ambience

The prison is an environment that steals identities, breaks the spirit, and reinforces the allegation that an individual in prison is always guilty, always bad, and is on a lower plane of respect than those on the outside. Likewise, the incarcerated are acknowledged as part of an assemblage through which they are no longer considered to be human. By assemblage, I refer to Rickert's definition: the collection and interactions of all things, non-human and human, that make the world what it is and allow for it to be. In this particular assemblage—I'll refer to it as the *dehumanizing assemblage*—society has created the idea of the incarcerated as evil and prison as a place to stop that evil. Within this assemblage, various entities are being used to dehumanize and dispossess the individual. Within this dehumanizing assemblage, the incarcerated are no longer seen as people; they are seen as something less than and something that does not merit humane treatment. Rey expressed his frustration over the total control that the law—prison guards in this instance—has on the incarcerated and how the environment is strategically designed to make one feel like they are no longer human:

“You're an animal in a cell. Everywhere you go, you are in a cell. You go to sleep, you are in a cell. You go to eat, you are in a cell. You go outside, you are in a fucking cell. There are walls, bars, chains, and locks everywhere. The guards

treat you like a fucking kid. They follow you everywhere you go. You turn your head and there they are. Always around. I mean, I'm an adult. I know how to get place to place on my own. I know how to find my way around, but they gotta be there. They have to follow you. That's not how humans live their lives."

The ambient rhetoric of the prison that Rey describes proves that, within an assemblage, there are multiple factors that are intra-acting with each other and transforming as they come into contact with other factors. As Karen Barad argues, "Existence is not an individual affair" (Rickert 1). The subject/object dichotomy has already begun to dissolve as matter, objects, environment, and the nonhuman's power is finally being merited its worth. Rickert writes *Ambient Rhetoric* in order to break down the long held misconception that the subject takes mastery over the Other, the non-human. One being does not equal Being. There are various factors at play that interact and intra-act with each other. The "subject" is in an interconnected web with the environment and others. Therefore, in this particular humanizing literacy event of tattoos within the prison setting, the "subject," or the incarcerated, is in play with multiple factors: the prison itself, the guards, the law, other incarcerated individuals, prison rules, race, age, amongst other elements. The "subject" does not possess agency. Rather, the "subject" possesses a potentiality for agency. It is through the web of all his or her surroundings, sociopolitical elements, timing, and every influencing factor, where agency emerges as each entity interacts and intra-acts with each other. As agency emerges, other agencies may be destroyed, as is in the prison setting.

Every element within the world has the potentiality of an emergent agency. From the smallest things that may not even be considered important to the big things that are known to have influence, every element, or as Heidegger would put it, *thing*, is operational and even

necessary. Ambience is the background of intelligibility. That background is part of the give-and-take that humans partake in with their surroundings. We may not give it much focus, but “ambience puts us in immediate contact with a situation in its entirety” (Rickert 7). We cannot sufficiently assess, analyze, observe, or theorize unless we take into consideration the entirety, the whole, the everything. Ambience opens our eyes to the effect that an environment has on people and objects, and how people and objects affect the environment. In each environment, possibilities emerge that are unique to each separate environment. For example, the environment, the place, the setting (time), the ambience of a room, affects how and what occurs. Rickert gives the example of Neolithic cave drawings. Before a certain time, these cave drawings were seen but never *recognized*. People took note but never saw any meaning in the cave drawings. The environment had not yet been set up to acknowledge the value behind them just yet. Fast-forward a few hundred years and the background has changed substantially. Now, cave drawings are seen as a lens into understanding the past. A self-reflexiveness takes place years later because of all the drastic transformations that humans and the environment have undergone. The cave drawings may be the same but they have become something entirely new for us. They are no longer just images but discoveries that raise and answer questions about the human. Rickert explains that “the background had to change before the cave drawings became disclosed to us in a newly meaningful manner” (5). Thus, the ambience is an unpredictable force in the way our perspective of events, people, and objects are shaped.

The prison setting *is* the cave drawings. In this moment in time, many people are regarding prison and the incarcerated for their superficial implications: the prison is for people who are bad and those incarcerated are those bad people. James Forman Jr. introduces Paul Butler into his research on mass incarceration as a former successful federal prosecutor and as

someone who was good at “sending people to jail” (994). Butler describes, “I was doing the Lord’s work...I was helping people in the most immediate way—delivering the protection of the law to communities that needed it most, making the streets safer, and restoring to victims some measure of the dignity that a punk criminal had tried to steal” (Forman 994). To him, everyone he sent to prison was guilty, deserving of what came to them. This mentality is common amongst those on the outside of the prison walls. How did this perspective of the prison system and those incarcerated emerge?

In Michel Foucault’s *Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, he describes prisons as “complete and austere institutions” born at the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries with a new legislation exercising that the power to punish was a general function of society. Even with its novelty during its first few years of the nineteenth century, the prison was so bound up into society that “it banished into oblivion all the other punishments” (Foucault 231-232). The goal of the prison was for the moral improvement of the individual—a goal that now feels distant from the institution. Foucault states that the prison has transformed, but it has not changed. It has not disappeared regardless of the well aware inconveniences and dangers it possesses. “And yet one cannot ‘see’ how to replace it” (Foucault 232).

Foucault writes, “This ‘self-evident’ character of the prison, which we find so difficult to abandon, is based first of all on the simple form of ‘deprivation of liberty’” (232). A form of disciplinary action against individuals who have been convicted of wrongdoing, the prison assumes responsibility in all aspects of the individual’s life. It is an unceasing discipline; a despotic and repressive punishment. According to Melanie Joy McNaughton, the penitentiary is an institution meant to “exert total control over the lives of those within the system” and the incarcerated, consequently, become “indistinguishable members of a group with no freedom to

act” (134). The prison’s responsibility over the incarcerated’s lives creates a conflict within the individual, as seen through Rey’s frustration, of hating to be followed everywhere, never away from guards, but also being so isolated from the outside world and from autonomy that one feels dispossessed from who they are and what they are.

Foucault describes one principle of the prison: isolation. The individual must be completely apart from the external world and from others incarcerated. However, through this isolation, the individual also becomes isolated from oneself—dispossessed. Chris S. Earle describes the forcible dispossession that the incarcerated undergo as a suppression of their address-ability and response-ability. Individuals are no longer seen or heard. The walls surrounding them act as physical and figurative borders that deny access to the ability to affect. The dehumanizing assemblage denies individuals of something as simple as an acknowledgment of being. Isolated from everything, one loses any sense of self and struggles with the “depersonalizing and desubjectifying logic of prison” (Earle 54). Two American prison systems, Auburn and Philadelphia, were founded on the belief that the incarcerated must be isolated from their moral existence because “solitude is the primary condition of total submission” (Foucault 237).

Built upon such philosophies, the prison is made for those that are forcibly dispossessed—the deserving, guilty, and evil. G. Ferrus described the three convict types: the first “require[s] isolation day and night” and if in contact with others, “a light mask made of metal netting” must be worn, the second is “viscous, stupid, and evil by indifference,” and the third is “inept or incapable” (Foucault 254). Ferrus goes on, “Considered as a whole, criminals are nothing less than madmen” (Foucault 254). With Ferrus’s typology of the types of convicts,

Paul Butler's hate for the "criminal" appears to be justified. Those shallow claims made by Ferrus guided the thinking of many who read his work.

With no other alternatives, "the prison, that darkest region in the apparatus of justice, is the place where the power to punish, which no longer dares to manifest itself openly, silently organizes a field of objectivity in which punishment will be able to function openly as treatment" (Foucault 256). Today, the same holds true. Angela Davis describes the prison as a "punishment industry" (Davis and Dent 1236). Again, the prison has not changed; it has only transformed. In an interview, Angela Davis describes her own personal experiences:

"If I were to try to summarize my impressions of prison visits all over the world, and most of them have been to women's prisons, including three jails which I visited involuntarily, I would have to say that they are uncannily similar. I have always felt as if I am in the same place. No matter how far I have traveled across time and space—from 1970 to 2000, and from the women's House of Detention in New York (where I was myself incarcerated) to the women's prison in Brasilia, Brazil—no matter how far, there is a strange sameness about prisons in general" (Davis and Dent 1237).

This vast machinery of dispossession has not only survived but thrived, and been made into a business. According to Caleb Smith, "Governments at all levels began using prisons to manage a whole range of social problems—mental illness, drug addiction, vagrancy, and above all, poverty itself" (161). Used as a method of putting away our "problems," prisons are a means of punishment rather than a means of rehabilitation.

Paul Butler's perspective only changed upon his own arrest. Known as "the Avenger of the hood" during his prosecuting days, he had never seen the system from the defendant's

perspective. Held in a filthy holding cell and standing witness to officers lying about the details of his arresting incident, Butler may have been acquitted but his view of the justice system was forever changed. Paul Butler now advocates for the incarcerated and those facing punitive punishment. He poses the question, “If it took the white majority more than two hundred years to understand that slavery was wrong, and approximately one hundred years to realize that segregation was wrong (and still many don’t understand), how long will it take them to perceive that American criminal justice is evil?” (Forman 998). Prisons are a place where incarcerated bodies become objects of punishment and where “prisoners are first and foremost property of the state” (Phillips 373). The journey from society into the constraints of the prison walls finds individuals gouged of the part of their souls that merit them human. Instead, the guilt applied to these individuals automatically places them into a protocol where the definition of who they are *is* state property, and retrieving that part of themselves is the most difficult part of the process of going from human to object back to human.

The environment has a significant potentiality for agency and ability to affect. In regards to the prison setting, the ambience automatically places certain humans below others and strips the individual of respect and agency. It is not just the human that has the power to take away; it is also the non-human. Furthermore, it is not only the human that has the power to give; it is also the non-human. Things, humans, and environments all have the potential for unique agencies to emerge. Those agencies can only be unlocked if looked at together and not separate, if afforded the same value, and if recognized in a newly envisioned rhetorical dimension.

More than just acknowledging the agency of ambience, Rickert wants to dissolve the subject/object dichotomy. Everything is not separately reacting to separate things, but unfolding together through a natural embeddedness. Each element is threaded together through and across

networks, connecting within a dense web, and combining and recombining in flexible assemblages. In this chapter, I analyze the various ways in which the non-human tattoo, the prison, the incarcerated, and everything that is part of the environment, work together to create the dehumanizing assemblage of the prison.

The Convict Body as State Property

With all the hardships that entering prison brings, a person is bound to change. Guero knew that he served his time for a reason. Three terms and he says that he does not want to add anymore to that. Alix Lambert asked an incarcerated male what the most difficult thing about being in prison was. The eleven-year prison veteran responded, “To remain human” (107). I asked Guero the same question. In very similar words, he said, “The hardest thing is trying to keep your humanity.” Four brick walls, a concrete floor, and guards on constant watch creates an ambience that tells those inside that they are not equal. They are inferior. They are state property.

When discussing prison design with JJ, he recounted 2 weeks that he spent in solitary: “It was the worst experience of my life. I was locked up 24 hours for 14 days in a room with no bed. The floor was cold, it was dark, I did not get to talk to anyone at all, I never got to leave, and the room was no bigger than a 5x7 small bathroom. It was shit.” Solitary is meant to punish a prisoner already being punished. The design of this room is going to be even harsher than the rest of the prison. Solitary was a miniature house of correction that “ensured inmates’ restricted economy of space, light and colour” (Moran and Jewkes 170). JJ also emphasized how he only spent 9 months total in prison but how he was still able to get a taste of the dehumanizing assemblage of prison. “I wasn’t there long enough to have the same experience as others. It didn’t affect me as much as if I had been in there for years, but that time in solitary was...[shakes head while looking down]...it was tough. It was a glimpse of what I would be experiencing all

the time if I had been locked up for a bigger crime. All I know is that I wouldn't ever want to go back into solitary again. You go crazy in there.” Similar to JJ, Rey, having been in prison for almost seven years, explained:

“No motherfucker ever wanted to go into solitary. It was hell. It changes you. Shit happens in there that can never unhappen. You are in there 24/7. To keep busy, you develop a routine. You live by that routine. You have to. It's the only way you can get an idea of how long you've been in there. The only way to keep yourself. There ain't no one around to talk to, it's dark, and you just gotta learn to be alone. Fuck, when I was in there, I started talking to myself. I needed to hear a voice. You start off just thinking to yourself, then you talk out loud, and then pretty soon, you're talking to yourself and you don't even know you're talking to yourself. People come out of there crazy. They develop all kinds of mental issues. They start hearing voices in their head, they're paranoid, they get OCD. You can always tell when someone has just gotten out of solitary. It's something in the way they walk, the way they hold themselves, the look on their faces, their eyes. Prison is bad but at least you get to talk to people, you get to walk around, go outside sometimes. Solitary—that shit's cruel.”

The lack of human contact, the intentional isolation, deprivation of sensory stimulants, and innate design of solitary confinement depletes much of what it means to be human. Without human contact, the social death heightens to a level of dispossession that extends towards the self. The fact that individuals feel the need to talk to themselves just so that they can hear the sound of a human voice proves how the sensory deprivation and isolation of solitary confinement

transforms the mental state of an individual. That transformation leads to an even further dispossession as the effects of solitary confinement exceed and persist long after the experience.

The architectural designs of prisons have a strong hold on how the incarcerated develop as humans throughout their sentences. “Designers of spaces consider...ambient power through which to direct or shape human behavior...geographers understand that space can affect ways people act within it, and are increasingly applying this perspective to carceral spaces” (Moran and Jewkes 169). Architects are intentionally specific about the goals of their designs. Prisons, historically, are rooted in ideas of punishment. According to Sharon Shalev, a faculty member at Oxford Law, activist for prison reform, and author, these architects think “very carefully about how to maximize isolation and ensure that prisoners have the minimum sensory stimulation possible within the law. So the cells are designed in such a way that the only thing prisoners can see when they look outside is a wall” (Stern 108).

A prison inevitably carries messages of dehumanization but many have turned the other way when questions of prisoner abuse are raised because they *are* objects of punishment. Objects whose punishments cause the development of mental issues. But as carceral logic upholds, they are deserving offenders. Even if just a suspect, this individual has “always deserved a certain punishment; one could not be the object of suspicion and be completely innocent” (Foucault 42). Charles Dickens visited Eastern State Penitentiary in Pennsylvania. He writes in *American Notes* of the “cruel and wrong” intentions of the prison and of solitary confinement:

“I believe that very few men are capable of estimating the immense amount of torture and agony which this dreadful punishment, prolonged for years, inflicts upon the sufferers...and in reasoning from what I have seen written upon their faces, and what to my certain knowledge feel within, I am only the more

convinced that there is a depth of terrible endurance in it which no one but the sufferers themselves can fathom, and which no man has a right to inflict upon his fellow-creature. I hold this...to be immeasurably worse than any torture of the body: and because its ghastly signs and tokens are not so palpable to the eye and sense of touch as scars upon the flesh; because its wounds are not upon the surface, and it extorts few cries that human ears can hear; therefore I the more denounce it, as a secret punishment which slumbering humanity is not roused up to stay” (678).

Thus, the prison, historically, has proven to be a place of disgrace and punishment; its design aimed at giving the incarcerated as little as lawfully possible and torturing its inhabitants in an inhumane and physically undetectable manner. The incarcerated are caught up in the ambience. The environment and architecture of solitary confinement speaks volumes for what type of message those who constructed it wish to convey: mental and physical health come second to the walls’ goal of depriving a person of their sanity, their freedom, and humanity.

In prisons all over the world, overcrowding has proven an issue. In the Russian prisons that researcher Alix Lambert observed, there were groups of twenty and more men piled into cell blocks made for six, as can be seen in Figure 1 (85). “Detention centers provide just a quarter of the United Nations-mandated four square meters of living space per prisoner” (Lambert 4). Furthermore, many incarcerated individuals are being kept alive on only one dollar a day. As a result, they are malnourished. In detention centers in Moscow, made to accommodate only 80,000 people, SIZOs (holding facilities for those awaiting trial) are containing four times that number. One incarcerated male in the Zone (the nickname for the Russian prison) mentioned how he was assigned into a cell made for thirty-eight men that was already housing fifty-five.

Another described his experience, “Imagine twenty-four hours a day, 120 people in a cell. How much time would each prisoner get to wash at the faucet or stand by the window?” (Lambert 80).



Figure 1 Packed Cell

According to the American Bar Association’s *Standards for Criminal Justice: Treatment of Prisoners*, incarcerated individuals must be provided with “humane and healthful living conditions” and “should take necessary steps to avoid crowding that exceeds a correctional facility’s rated capacity or adversely affects the facility’s delivery of core services at an adequate level, maintenance of its physical plant, or protection of prisoners from harm, including the spread of disease” (20, 63-64). As of 2007 in California, the prison population was cramming 173,000 individuals in institutions designed to house at least one-third less. The Department of Corrections is the largest employer of the state. With 90 penitentiaries, small prisons, and camps stretched out across 900 miles, California’s overcrowding forced them to transfer 5,000 prisoners as far away as Tennessee to alleviate the crisis (Platt 203). In total in the United States as of 2013, the incarcerated population since 1973 went from 740,000 to 1.5 million in 2005, and broke the 2-million mark in 2000. With an average intake of inmates of 1,500 per week, “the

carceral system of the United States has now ballooned to proportions such that if it were a city it would be the country's fourth-largest metropolis" (Smith 163).

In Texas, overcrowding's direct impact includes higher stress levels due to resulting inadequacies: bed space, cleanliness, program and support space, and food and laundry support. With these, the ABA's standards are not being met as this increases the risk of disease outbreak, other medical problems, and an overall unsafe environment. In various cases, Texas's penal system's unjust conditions have caused illness and even death. In 2011, some Texas prisons cut back meals and started to serve individuals only two meals a day on weekends, compared to the previous three meals a day, seven days a week. "The meal reductions are part of an effort to trim \$2.8 million in food-related expenses from the 2011 fiscal yearly budget of the Texas Department of Criminal Justice, the state prison agency" (Fernandez 22). Furthermore, only 21 out of the 111 state prisons overseen by the Texas Department of Criminal Justice are fully air conditioned. Texas heat is year round and brutal. In 2008, 54 men were claimed to be subjected to Death Valley-like heat for 10 days at temperatures reaching 126 degrees indoors. In 2012, a law suit was filed when several men died in heat-related causes. Adequate ventilation and a maintained temperature of 65 and 85 degrees is Texas law. However, that does not apply to state prisons (Fernandez 15).

Texas has a reputation for its strict penal system, but at what point does strict become inhumane? It is easy to see the incarcerated as "criminals" and the prison as a place for keeping them from us. However, the prison, in its mere being and construction, "is part of an unconscious but accessible background to our activity, and as such, it is essential to our mode of being" (Rickert 18). Being packed like cattle, crammed in cages like dogs, and expected to live for years under these conditions can only lead a human to feel less than human. The design and

architecture of the building itself is a vital rhetorical factor that shapes and transforms how we see the incarcerated and how the incarcerated see themselves. The prison is being used as a rhetorical device by the state to prove how ambience is key in conveying to the incarcerated that their three meals a day, air conditioned rooms, and basic human liberties are not as important as state budgets.

There are countless agents that are affecting every being, haunting them, and forcing them to *be* in a certain way. The nonhuman possesses a potentiality for agency within the assemblage that further entangles, complicates, and influences relationships. The walls and steel bars of prison are actants in an individual's ability to be seen and heard. The prison environment inhabits nonhuman factors that impede one's acknowledgement as a person—a human being. Chris S. Earle explains that “any sense of self, any ability to act and resist, is dependent on others, on our very address-ibility and response-ibility” (52). When shifting from the relative freedom of society into the bounding prison, tattoos impart an influence that empowers individuals when their “free will” has been stripped from them and when their address-ibility and response-ibility are drastically hindered. When individuals become “inmates” in a prison, the respect that they once had on the outside does not transfer to the inside. The new environment leaves the human with no respect, denied of subjectivity and experiencing a social death. Respect is vital in a prison setting because without respect, one will not be acknowledged. Earle explains that “what imprisonment forces one to confront is the very (im)possibility of calling and being called” (58). Individuals without respect will not have opportunities for their potential agency to emerge. Their capacity to address someone and for that person to respond becomes so vital to their ability to hold on to a sense of self, agency, and purpose. Without this acknowledgement

and proper amounts of space, the strategic architectural design of the prison makes an individual's social death start to feel like a disintegration of being.

The Force of Prison Walls

Ambience plays a large role in the ways that the incarcerated are treated, how they assert their power, and the ways that they form their dwellings when they are in an environment meant to make them feel like objects. The prison is not just an environment but a dehumanizing assemblage where agency emerges in the nonhuman. It is a rhetorical device used first by those in charge of them to control a population of individuals, and then used by those same individuals to re/create a humanizing assemblage where one can survive, dwell, and re/create their identities, re/discovering the agency that the tangled web of factors hides when they first enter that prison.

The prison is inseparable from sociopolitical factors that have been embedded in its creation. The walls, the cells, the fences, security towers, etc., are part of its materialization as a location. Its function and its purpose are known, unable to separate from its metaphoric and literal meanings. Although the institution can be remade, it cannot be unmade. It then becomes an environment in which the assemblage and all its actants must abide by the new laws of that world. Rey described the prison, "We are a world within another world. We have our rules and laws that we have to follow just like the outside...except it's not like the outside. Our laws are much stricter; we have less freedom. I mean, it is prison." When entering into this other world, an individual is no longer an individual. The respect and agency that they once experienced is taken away and they become state property. This occurs for a variety of reasons. For one, correctional officers treat them as inferior, their uniforms are forces that label them as convicts, and the walls of the prison act as barriers and agents in the dehumanizing assemblage of prison life. However, mostly, the law becomes an actant in who is determined a criminal. Once a person

has committed a criminal act, their biography shifts from human to delinquent, identified by that one transgression. Even after prison, that individual is and will always be a “criminal” since applying for housing and jobs requires that they identify themselves as having been in prison.

The dehumanization of becoming objects of punishment is furthered with an emotional dispossession that affects the individual in a way that cannot be seen but is felt deeply. I asked Rey what he felt the hardest part about being in prison was. He painfully responded:

“Man, prison is tough. You go through shit in there. Even through everything, the hardest part was getting family visits. I went five years before I got a visit. My family came in and told me about the outside. They would tell me about the bad things happening, the help that they needed, and the struggles they were experiencing. It sucked because I felt so guilty sitting in a cage doing nothing. The worst part was watching them walk away. So easily, they got to walk out the door. Me, on the other hand, I was stuck here. I couldn’t go with them. I couldn’t just step through a door. I had no power. I was helpless to my family. I was helpless to myself.”

Rey, as do many other incarcerated individuals, feel a deep dispossession as they experience these complex and conflicting feelings. Rey expresses anguish at not being able to see his family, yet he told me that, at a certain point, he told them to just stop visiting him altogether because it was too hard to feel so helpless. The social death that Rey has experienced has troubled him so much that in cases where he is able to feel the connection to and see his family, he chooses to detach himself from those opportunities because of his inability to truly connect with them outside of the prison walls. The lack of

agency in the lives of those he loves torments him in ways that make him feel powerless and helpless. Similarly, Vaclav Havel's prison letters became a means of psychic survival. The letters that he wrote and received while in prison were the means by which he found both happiness and displeasure. Havel expresses, "These letters are all one has here. You read them a dozen times, turn them over in your mind, every detail is either a delight or a torment and makes you aware of how helpless you are" (Earle 57). Havel expresses his changing moods with the letters. He explains how when he receives no news from home, those feelings of helplessness are exacerbated, and when he receives good news, it feels as though things are getting along fine without him. To feel helpless when things go wrong, yet alienated when things are going right must have brought out a different type of vulnerability than these men have ever felt. Dispossessed from family, from the outside world, and from the self—prison impedes upon an individual's psyche in a way that exceeds simply "doing time."

Thomas Rickert explains in *Ambient Rhetoric* how Cornell University and its surrounding environment functions as something more than just a university. He writes, "Cornell becomes not just a university, understood as a human enterprise requiring a material location (a setting for human practice), but an entity that in its social, political, economic, and *material* realization already gives rise to and invokes the metaphoric and the topic" (66). Cornell is placed near a chasm and above an abyss. The chasm and abyss are metaphors for ignorance, irrationality, and the university's threat of losing its sociopolitical place. Rickert explains how Cornell's topology acts as "topolitics," not just mirroring the university crisis, but acting *as* the university crisis.

The four brick walls of the prison represent the sociopolitical factors affecting society's mentality of *what* the incarcerated are instead of *who* they are—which is human. However, the

walls themselves, the architecture, the design, and the carceral geography prove to be strong actants in the way the incarcerated forms/maintains their identity and how others—guards, society, and fellow incarcerated individuals—treat them. Prisons are often “built in out-of-the-way rural areas, making it easier to lose sight of the humanity of the people [being] warehouse[d]” (Platt 203). Set away from the rest of society, the physical distance reflects in the way people view the incarcerated. The farther, the less human. Furthermore, prison design is crucial in understanding how the goals of the criminal justice system are expressed and experienced (Moran and Jewkes 164). The role of the prison in society is physically conveyed through the bricks and materials of which the prison is made. Dominique Moran and Yvonne Jewkes argue:

“jails and prisons represent more than just warehouses of bed space for arrested or convicted men and women. They are more complicated environments than just good or bad, comfortable or not. The design of a jail or prison is critically related to the philosophy of the institution, or maybe even of the entire criminal justice system. It is the physical manifestation of a society’s goals and approaches for dealing with arrested and/or convicted men and women” (164).

Bricks, cement, cell bars, and location all contribute to the ambience that the prison creates and act as rhetorical tools by the state in achieving their goals. They all contribute to the perspective of what the prison is and what incarcerated are. As mentioned before, there appears to be a general understanding of the prison as a bad place for bad people. Local residents of a Pennsylvania city with a federal prison expressed that a prison “lowers property values, increases levels of crime, endangers their safety through escapes, attracts ‘undesirable’ elements and damages the reputation of the area” (Moran and Jewkes 174). For the outsiders, prisons are

unwanted in their home areas. The residents are fearful of those who may escape and the dangers that may befall them if they do. Prisons, more often than not, are instantly recognizable as places for punishment and detainment. Older prisons in the UK are archetypal. Their designs are meant to mirror fortified castles. No one gets in and no one gets out. Most prisons, according to Moran and Jewkes, are bland in exterior, have a uniform style, vast expanses of brick, few, small windows, and no unnecessary decoration (174). The structure of prisons is intentional and stem from different needs: “economic (which method costs less?), architectural and administrative (which form guarantees the best surveillance?)” (Foucault 239). Because of that, the design, these bricks of shame, have created an ambience and environment meant only for those purposes—there is no space left for rehabilitation.

Aside from architectural design and geography, the hostile nature of just knowing one is in prison forces individuals to find means for survival—socially, mentally, and physically. Rey provided some insight on rules for survival within the prison. He explained how all prisons are filled with violence:

“When you first enter prison, everyone is a little rougher with you. You don’t just automatically gain respect. You have to prove yourself. Your first year or two is tough. People are always ragging on you, trying to take advantage, trying to steal your shit. Every day you are getting in fights. That’s how it is. Fighting is survival. Eventually you fight so much that you learn to give a good ass whooping. People know who they can beat on and who to lay off after a while. You know, after you’ve done some time, proven that you have a good head on your shoulders, you’re able to handle yourself and make decisions in difficult situations, that’s when prisoners know you’re cool. They give you respect. Same

with the guards. They're in there with you, too. They have to deal with prisoners 24/7 just like we do. They may be the ones in charge but they are still getting in fights when they gotta break us up, seeing the same shit we do, in danger just like us. After a while, after they get to know you and know what you stand for, they'll treat you better. Newbies though, you are always going to get it tough."

What about those individuals who did not learn to fight? Rey says that they had it bad. They had to keep to themselves but that they were always be taken advantage of. Violence—that was regular prison life for Rey. He recalled how it was always there: every day, all day. Rey was eventually transferred to a unit where fighting was even more prominent and dangerous. The Beto Unit 1 was an aggressive place. It was known for its violence. Rey describes a fight he participated in:

"Every day you were getting pounded on or you were pounding on someone. You couldn't go nowhere alone. Well, one day, I was alone. This one guy that had some beef with me came up to me and I knew it was going to go down. In my gang, it was a rule, a *regla*, that you always carry a shank with you. They had rules like that. *Disciplinas* that you had to follow, and that was one of them. Lucky for me, too. The guy came up to me and I had my knife and cut his leg. Another guy jumped in and I was fighting both. The black guys respected that. I was all alone and I still held my own. They told me I was a Down Ass Mexican after that. I earned their respect. So I got it tattooed.' After that, they'd see me or notice my tattoo and say that. 'That's a down ass Mexican right there.'"



Figure 2 Down Ass Mexican

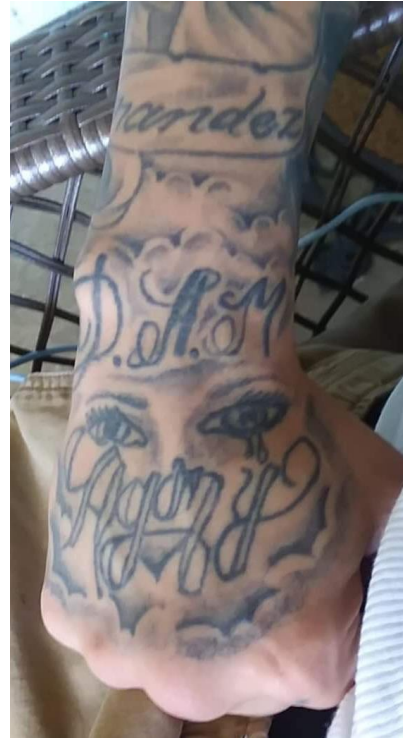


Figure 3 Down Ass Mexican Close-Up

That was one way in which Rey was able to earn respect, gain acknowledgement, and re/discover his agency. He was sent to a prison known for its fight-to-survive reputation. His fighting experience helped and protected him in an environment and structure where violence thrived. However, living in a place where you are expected to fight to survive takes its toll. He closed by saying, “Even then, all that fighting and all that blood didn’t earn you enough. You still had to do other things to keep your respect...to feel safe.”

Research done in carceral geography shows that the prison’s function is to have a space set aside for securing, detaining, and locking up/away populations that are problematic. Thus, the architecture is infused with spatial tactics where the philosophy of punishment is starkly representative of the “ideals upon which the prison was originally designed and built” (Moran and Jewkes 175). A researcher, Karen Morin, went into a federal Special Management Unit at the US penitentiary at Lewisburg, Pennsylvania. Upon her observations of 23-24 hour lockdowns

and double-celling of inmates in tiny spaces meant for one, she argues that the prison design is a “structure that produces only fear, terror, violence, and death” (Moran and Jewkes 175).

Just as with the environment, nonhuman entities have function and affect in this dehumanizing assemblage. In the prison setting, the nonhuman takes on a position of power that becomes unlocked and revealed within the ambience. Laurie Gries quotes W.J.T. Mitchell in her book, *Still Life with Rhetoric*, “Pictures want...to be seen as complex individuals occupying multiple subject positions and identities” (1). Similar to the what Rickert argues, the visual holds the possibility for rhetorical agency just as much as the human does. Tattoos are the visual. As tattoos enter the dehumanizing assemblage, “probabilities [are] realized in movement, materialized in space, and invented in place” (Rickert 97). Tattoos take objects—state property—and help them to re/create their identities. Rather than becoming indistinguishable amongst the rows and rows of uniformed “inmates”, the rhetorical role of the tattoo within the prison setting is crucial to the incarcerated establishing some sense of autonomy over their own lives. Margo Demello argues that tattoos “play a crucial role in creating the convict’s sense of identity in relation to the prison establishment” (10). For Rey, his identity was partially shaped through the tattoo of “Down Ass Mexican.” The iconography became entangled within the dehumanizing assemblage and from it, emerged a sense of agency, identity, and dwelling amongst his fellow incarcerated men. From then on, men who associated with him respected him. The tattoo, as it circulated through the prison, enabled Rey to garner respect. Wherever Rey went, the knowledge of his status as “Down Ass Mexican” and the events that transpired to attain the tattoo went with him, too.

Thus, the subject/object dichotomy is destroyed. Humans become objects and objects become the active agents in how an individual is treated. Every element contains potentiality for

an agency to emerge that is amplified because of the environment. Very simply, Rickert writes, “Place affects us—it is an occasion for the world’s revealing” (31). Ambience opens our eyes to the effect that an environment has on people and objects, and how people and objects affect the environment. The environment inevitably transforms who we are as individuals. Steel and cement, fluorescent lighting, immobility, four walls, sensory deprivation, and everything else that goes into creating the ambience of the dehumanizing assemblage of the prison informs the ways in which individuals interact, rebel, conform, or fight the imposed identity they have been given as “inmate,” earning the respect that those same walls have taken away.

CHAPTER III

RHETORIC OF THE PRISON: TATTOOS AS A FORM OF *KAIROS*

Body as Object, Tattoo as Agent

As soon as an individual enters the prison context, dehumanization tactics deplete the incarcerated from having any autonomy over their lives. JJ reveals, “No matter who you were on the outside, the guards’ jobs were to be assholes. That was it. They were there to be assholes. You did anything wrong and they were there to punish you. Shit, you do anything they didn’t like and they would let you have it.” The incarcerated are objects to society and objects to those in charge of guarding them. Inside and outside, respect is gone and their identity is warped into something less than a human being. In interviews with former prisoners, B.V. Olguin observes that a prisoner is:

“a survivor of unspeakable horrors that include forced servitude; public beatings and frequent, humiliating body cavity searches; prolonged sensory deprivation in specially designed ‘control units’ ...and involuntary subjection to psychiatric drugs designed to psychologically, emotionally, and physically incapacitate” prisoners (191).

This routine guts individuals of their humanity. The prison institution is put in place “not for the purposes of rehabilitation but towards the goal of minimizing risks; rehabilitation is seen merely as “a bonus, not a priority” (208). Thus, the incarcerated are no longer people, but dangerous objects of punishment.

Unlike individuals on the outside, jewelry, clothes, and other signifiers for status, respect, and affiliation are unavailable to the incarcerated. As a result, the agency of the tattoo becomes dominant in context with the environment. Scot Barnett quotes Merleau-Ponty, “The flesh is not an obstacle between [bodies], it is their means of communication” (6). As the body becomes an object, it is transformed into a canvas for tattoos to give voice back to those who no longer have one, and to allow individuals to retain some dignity and autonomy over their lives. “The prison tattoo is a ‘subversive bodily act’ in that it reestablishes the convict’s authority over his own body and challenges the system which attempts to control it” (Demello 13). The prison’s attempt to dehumanize those incarcerated creates a stronger desire for opposition because the incarcerated must find some way for their autonomy and individuality to survive.

In addition, a tattoo done inside of the system “permanently records the prison’s ‘failure,’ and persists as a prominent and permanent marker of defiance because there is no way to eliminate the visible criminality the mark will later represent as a finished product” (Olguin 172). One incarcerated man serving a lifetime sentence expressed this sentiment perfectly: “Sure, they got rules against tattooing. The man, he’s got rules against every fuckin’ thing. They’ll bust your ass any chance they get. But this is my body. It’s my novel, man, my poem, and I’m just gonna keep writin’ on it” (McNaughton 139). In this chapter, I argue that through *kairos*, the image, the act, and the literary practice of the tattoo is a rhetorical device used by “state property” that transforms the body into a network of signifiers, allowing personal identity and agency to re/emerge in this dehumanizing assemblage in order to create a dwelling for individuals.

Kairos in the Prison

The incarcerated have utilized *kairos* in their favor by not only attuning to their environments but using the environment and the nonhuman as a rhetorical tool to counter the

affects of the prison's ambient rhetoric. Rey's love of art and drawing enabled his survival and allowed his sentence to be served with ease and a variety of benefits. Attuning to the situation and environment, Rey began to perfect a craft that allowed him to function in an underground economy of prison tattooing. I asked Rey if his prison life was made better because he was a tattoo artist. He replied after a laugh:

“Fuck yeah! I got everything and anything I wanted. I had it made in there. No one messed with me. They knew better. I didn't go in having experience though. Growing up, I always loved drawing. I drew everything. All the time. My family will tell you the same thing. In prison, I had these boards and I was just doodling on them. I had some work done and this guy came up to me asking if I knew how to tattoo. I told him I ain't ever done it. Later on, he brought me a machine and let me practice on his leg. That was it after that. My lines were good and straight. I had a natural talent for it. Everyone wants a tattoo in prison. I had guys coming to me with everything. I got it all: cellphones, drugs, commissary, food, whatever I wanted. That was from prisoners. Hell, I tattooed guards, too. Doing that, I got all access. They would bring me t-shirts and socks. I'd tell them that I needed this or that and I got it. Anything I asked for. Some guys tried to pay in sexual favors, too. I just kicked them out. I wasn't about that.”

Through *kairos*, Rey was able to use his environment and the nonhuman tattoo as an avenue for agency, identity, respect, and protection. Rey not only took advantage of his talents, he attuned himself to the opportunity that had been given to him by the other incarcerated male to begin tattooing and cultivated that craft. Had he not attuned himself to the prison and the new rules of

the environment, his successes may never have been realized and his experiences within the prison may have been much harsher.

Similarly, JJ described the tattoo artists inside of the prison he served his sentence in: “They had it badass. They would get Cokes. Payment for their craft. People need to survive in prison. People don’t always get money. Not everyone has someone to help them out. You can survive on the food given in the cafeteria but breakfast is at three in the morning, lunch at eight, and then dinner at one. So from one in the afternoon until three in the morning the next day, what are you eating? You have to do something so you can have more than the crap they serve you. You gotta do certain work. That’s what they did. They took advantage of their art and tattooed for money or snacks.”

The incarcerated have found ways to adapt to and use their environment as a means of survival. Where the prison is meant to stop the use of language through its dispossessing nature, the tattoo artists have found ways to breach the rules of this world to create their own successes through *kairos*.

In *Ambient Rhetoric*, Rickert locates *kairos* in space-time. However, Rickert rebuilds the meaning of *kairos* by analyzing the traditional and modern descriptions in order to discover a new materialist definition. *Kairos* is an ancient Greek concept in rhetorical theory that has taken reference as a timely, appropriate, or advantageous moment for rhetorical action. It is the “right or opportune time to do something” (Rickert 75). With this customary meaning, *kairos* and the subject depend entirely on what cannot be controlled. Success is based off whether this auspicious opportunity was taken. One issue with this definition is that “there is too much emphasis on a rhetor’s powers for leveraging *kairos* and not enough sensitivity to what the

situation itself affords” (Rickert 76). The focus, once again, is on the rhetor. That is the issue. The rhetor contains a substantial amount of potential agency but she/he does not contain *all* of the potential agency. The situation itself, the ambience, the place, and the time—the new *kairos*—too have a force that must be considered as agential. Thus, it is not so much a stumbling upon the “right time” but adapting to the continually changing contexts.

Kairos is something “fundamentally dispersed and connected to various aspects of the external environment” (Rickert 77). It is a complex force that must be understood as including more than just time. *Kairos* is space, time, place, and ambience. Rickert writes, “It is misleading to suggest that a rhetor is subjectively responsible for an audience’s reaction. Responsibility...is dispersed throughout the situational environs, and the environs themselves are expanded to include formerly ignored or at least undertheorized variables” (Rickert 82). Now, let’s say that a rhetor is giving a speech in Virginia about equal rights in the 1700s. The time was very much different and his speech would be unsuccessful because the speech would not be accessible to many people other than those in the immediate area. The space could also affect how the speech is received. Is it in a church? Is it at a city meeting? Is it on the streets? All these settings play a role in who and *how* people hear. The ambience of Virginia in the 1700s (I use ambience as mood here) was very hostile towards people who were not white males. Those arguing for equal rights would be met with strong opposition. However, fast forward to 2019 and the climate is extremely different. For one, diversity is much more praised and deemed natural now than it was back then. Access to the speech would be available via person, social media, news, etc., so more people would be able to hear it. The time right now is very open to equal rights and protesting for those rights, so the speech in the exact same state and place would be much more successful now

than in the 1700s. It is the *kairos* that enables its success. The opportunity only gives a rhetor so much.

Now, the ancient Greek definition posits that “the situation is not something we create or something pre-existing that we stand against;” rather, the situation “anchors us in the awareness of the simple ‘that it is’” (Rickert 88). Again, the problem with the traditional definition is that there is no control. This is where Rickert brings in the Vitanzan *kairos* and explains that “it” is always happening. There is no opportune moment—“the *kairos* does what it does to us, with us, and alongside us” (Rickert 90). With this, Rickert acknowledges the potential agency that other forces such as humans, objects, etc., are able to contribute in an assemblage. It is because of the intermingling relationship amongst the environment, the *kairos*, the human, the nonhuman, and so on that things happen. However, it is not just a linear or step-by-step connection. *This* does not lead to *that*. Instead, with *kairos*, things are always changing, flowing, entangling, evolving, clashing, and becoming in their immersions with each other.

Rickert uses a very good example to explain in simple terms his ambient *kairos*. In the film, *The Usual Suspects*, the opportunity is dispersed within the material environs. When getting interrogated, Verbal (also the bad guy Soze) utilizes the material contents within the office he is being interrogated in to come up with a cover story in order to avert suspicion. In this situation of success (he gets away), agency emerges within each individual, the situation, the environment, the objects, the time, and the ambience and, thus, become co-inventors. Verbal capitalizes upon his environment and creates an alibi that proves himself innocent. He uses the office bulletin board, the desk, and even the manufacturer’s name on the coffee cup to create a believable cover story. In any other environment, success may not have been created. It was because of every single element within that ambience and time that the opportunity for success emerged. It was

not just an “opportune moment”; it was Verbal utilizing the environment to create that moment. He is attuning to the situation. It is the environment that unleashes possibilities and forecloses others. Thus, *kairos* should not be limited to being described as the “right time” but should be considered as a sea of forces that rest upon ambience.

Individuals who have artistic talent take advantage of the *kairos* of their situation. They understand their environment. Their “success depends on adapting to continually changing circumstance and ‘newly emergent contexts’” (Rickert 79). The environment is always situating us in arrangements that afford or impede on possibilities. As mentioned before, the incarcerated lose the respect and power that they had on the outside. Understanding that the prison changes their status as humans, the incarcerated must attune their behavior in a way that allows for the prison to become a place of opportunity rather than a site for loss. The incarcerated then utilize their situation and environment to guarantee their success and protection in this ambience.

For the incarcerated who possess artistic talent, tattooing others becomes a means of survival in the prison. Tattoos are agents and forces that assure security in this hostile environment that is constantly trying to break that down. In one case, Gallo, a formerly incarcerated male, describes his experience as a tattoo artist in the prison. Tattoos “helped him to survive unmolested and to retain economic self-sufficiency” (Phillips 373). He would barter his skills for items such as cigarettes, toothpaste, money, and other valuables. Without family and friends to send him money for those items, he was completely dependent upon himself, so tattooing became his tool for survival. Gallo happily expresses, “Man, tattooing gets you everywhere” (Phillips 358). His experiences in the prison, just like Rey’s, were positive due to *kairos* and his attunement to the environment. The ambience, the *kairos*, and the visual rhetoric

used by the incarcerated creates an emergent, distributed agency of the entangled things intra-acting.

Tattoo artists are taking their opportune moment and finding, within the environment, a means of survival. Incarcerated individuals who find themselves alone, *need* to find a way to survive. For the incarcerated who “receive no family visits it would be difficult for him to maintain a kind of life that is, at the very least, humane” (Gamo, 216). More than surviving, the incarcerated have employed the use of tattoos and *kairos* to create an industry that functions in the shadows and against the official prison labor economy. The *kairos* that unfolds is only made possible by the ambience and by the use of images as a rhetorical tool. Where an individual is expected to have no agency, no autonomy, no free choice, those same individuals are controlling guards, controlling other incarcerated men, and revealing the authority behind images etched on skin.

Restricted Spaces

Many incarcerated individuals use visual rhetoric, through prison tattooing, to mirror gang life into the prison. There are certain iconographies that are used by gangs to identify who individuals are, where they come from, what gang affiliations they hold, and what deeds they have done. These images have been developed from visuals that are common to the public sphere. However, the mainstream meanings of such images do not transfer once utilized by gangs. Instead, these images take on new meaning as the environment in which they are revealed in and the individual that they are tattooed on circulates. The mainstream iconography that gangs have adopted on the outside bleeds into the prison and becomes common knowledge, or rather, necessary knowledge, amongst those incarcerated. When individuals enter the prison, they must then adopt this new literacy—the language of prison tattoos—in order to understand the rules of

this world within a world. Rey has a Dallas Cowboys star tattooed on the back of his head, as shown in Figure 4. That image confirms his Puro Tango Blast gang affiliation. However, to any other individual who does not understand this language, he is merely a Dallas Cowboys fan.



Figure 4 Puro Tango Blast Star

Rey revealed many iconographies that are etched into the skin of gang members he saw in the prison he was assigned. These symbols, identifiable by the mainstream, are labels and signifiers for an individual's group belonging. These tattoos, Rey states, were respected. More than respected, those tattoos allowed for the incarcerated to re/discover their agency since those images linked them to gangs that controlled prison territory. "There are lots of images that gangs claim as theirs. You got Houston Astro stars, the Austin capital, the Oilers logo, the *Loteria* drunk man, UT Longhorns, Spurs stars. They were usually sports teams." Those tattoos not only convey to others gang affiliation, but put men back in a position of power amongst themselves and the incarcerated. The gangs and the prisons have given new language to these iconographies. They have given these images new power and agency in the lives of those incarcerated.

Ralph Cintron writes about gang life in his book *Angels' Town: Chero Ways, Gang Life, and Rhetorics of the Everyday*. In his ethnographic study, he discovers the ways in which gangs use rhetoric through the public sphere in a way that only the non-mainstream will understand. Lauren Gries explains how, through visual rhetoric, we are able to acknowledge the “significant, active role nonhuman things play in collective existence” (5). Taking on the same attitude, gangs have plastered across the walls of the city many common symbols; their meaning thought to be known by the public. However, those interpreted meanings are not the same as the meanings of those that painted them and to those they were painted for. Gangs have been “appropriating mainstream symbols and recontextualizing them into new meanings” both in and outside of the prison setting (Cintron 167). Gangs have been attuning to their environment and using the mainstream iconography to conquer territory, communicate with others, and to create a hierarchy amongst other gangs using the nonhuman within their collective existence in the world.

To the public eye, those outside of the realm of gang knowledge and iconography, graffiti is just vandalism. There's no underlying message that seems to be conveyed. However, to the insider eye, a language unfolds. Gangs utilize the art of graffiti to communicate, establish dominance, mark territory, start a war, etc. They have outsmarted the mainstream by appropriating their symbols and recontextualizing them into their own. Cintron writes, “The street gang performed a symbolic conquering of the mainstream when mainstream meanings gave way to gang meanings. For the most part, the mainstream could not interpret gang meanings, and thus a secret, esoteric, subterranean world was made” (167). The public sphere does not respect gangs. They do not welcome them; they do not allow them into their world. However, where respect is not given, these gangs, through the rhetorical images of graffiti, demand it.

In a societal hierarchy where the public restricts access to gang members, these same gang members counteract this by dominating the mainstream's own symbols and restricting them for themselves. For example, symbols such as martini glasses, top hats, pyramids, moons, and stars are all gang-adopted symbols. Depending on the color, the way it is drawn, the letters that accompany it, how many points the star has, etc., a gang can be defiling another's territory, starting violence, or establishing their respect. However, to the mainstream public, graffiti is a restricted space that only gang members are allowed to understand. "These meanings were appropriated from the mainstream, but...they underwent a translation to emerge as gang meanings that, for the most part, could no longer be read by the mainstream" (Cintron 168). The public sphere for gang graffiti is much the same as the environment of the prison. Both places were restricted to those that penetrated their walls. However, the individuals have now conquered those same walls to create a language that, though others may understand, only they may participate in. The incarcerated use tattoos to encode their bodies with symbols that provide individuals with an emergent agency to oppose a system that has objectified their bodies and put them at the bottom of the social hierarchy.

Thomas Rickert writes, "Opportunity becomes something dispersed into the material environs" (95). The ambience of the prison affords the incarcerated with very little. There are codes and rules that the walls of the prison mandate. However, *kairotic* opportunities emerge as the incarcerated take their experiences from the outside and apply them to the inside. The incarcerated must find a way to survive. Whether it is a mental or physical survival, they need to survive. Otherwise, the social death they have experienced coming into the prison will be everlasting. Attuning to their new environment, the incarcerated use whatever means they have to be able to create tattoos. The nonhuman materials around them become the things that can

restore what the prison has taken away. Toothbrush handles, needles, threads, burnt newspaper ashes, pen ink, paper clips—whatever can be used will be used to create the device and ink for tattoos (Phillips 371). Tattoos are more than just a picture on skin. Tattoos contain a “‘thing power’ in the way they gather forces and actors and in so doing ‘affect other bodies, enhancing or weakening their power’” (Barnett and Boyle 5). Living in a dehumanizing assemblage, the incarcerated utilize tattoos as actants that circulate, and through their circulation, combat and construct a humanizing assemblage. The circulation of tattoos allow for the re/creating of identity and restructuring of the prison as a dwelling place for the incarcerated.

Tattoos: Identities Enforced and Identities Re/Created

Gang tattoos give individuals inside the prison something to work towards, something to prove their self-worth with, and re/gain their self-dignity. The ambient rhetoric of the prison takes away a person’s name, dehumanizes, and isolates individuals, forcing them into a dispossession. An individual’s humanity is restored, partially, when others acknowledge that they have accomplished something substantial. Social deaths are reversed as affiliations with other individuals begin to form and grow. This is made evident through tattoos etched on the skin. Where the prison takes away identity, these tattoos allow for an agency to emerge that gives the incarcerated a sense of self. For Rey, his accomplishments were gang related. As a member of the Puro Tango Blasts, his tattoos needed to be earned. Rey explained how for the PTBs, you had to prove you were loyal. You had to live by the gang and follow their rules. There was a process through which you earned that respect. “Some guys had to undergo a beating. It was just a bunch of guys going at this one guy with no time limit, and he had to fight them alone.” PTB’s iconography also included cracked longhorn horns. They were given only to those that proved that they deserved them. The longhorn horns were an iconography claimed by the Texas

Syndicates, the PTBs biggest rival gang. If the horns were cracked, it meant that the individual had committed an act against a Texas Syndicate that the PTBs felt deserved rewarding.

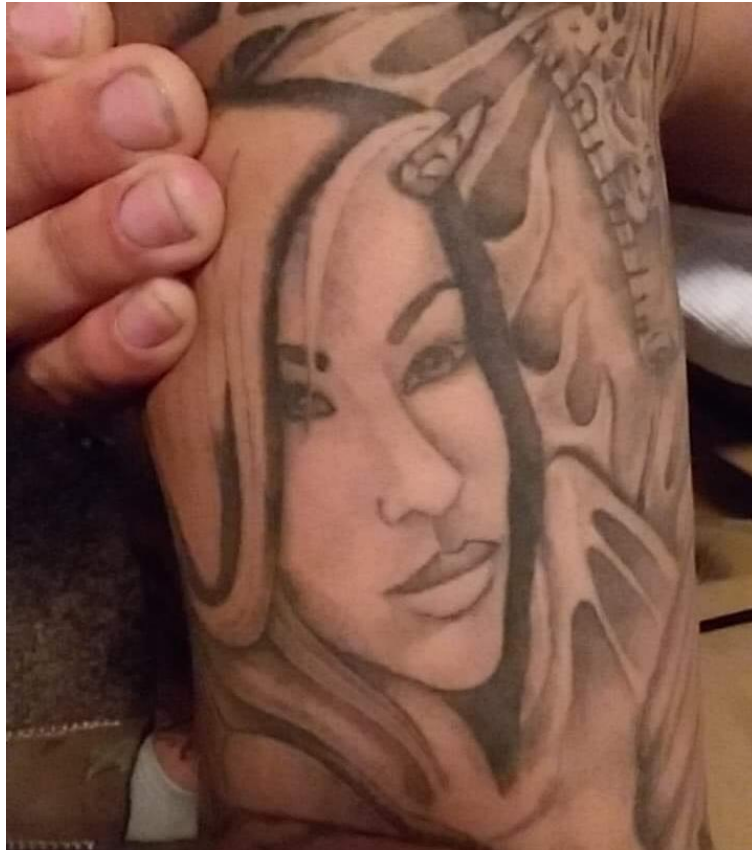


Figure 5 Woman with Cracked Horns

Wanting to prove himself to the PTBs, Rey felt extreme pride when he earned his cracked horns (Figure 5) by beating up a Texas Syndicate while in prison. This tattoo was a goal that contributed to Rey's self-completion, feeling of belonging with his gang, and mark of status to those around him.

As humans, we like to think that we have more control than we actually do. "Words, thoughts, and ideas are never really [ours]; more accurately, [we are] theirs" (Rickert 99-100). The way we act, do, think, etc., are very much affected by our environments. People, objects, environment, and language are co-adaptive, enmeshed, and enfolded with an agency that allows for, as Heidegger would phrase it, the world to world. In the prison, the incarcerated lose their

sense of identity. They are state property, they are referred to as “Inmate” rather than by name, and they are given prisoner numbers. Who they were and what they had before is erased and taken away. There’s an emptiness and loss of self that accompanies imprisonment. El Saadawi recounts her experiences: “I no longer had my first or last name, or my own personality. I became ‘Detainee No. 1536’ (Earle 55). As with all people, a name, something given to an individual at birth, is what Dale Carnegie describes as “the sweetest and most important sound in any language” (88). To have that taken away and be given a number or a title that is indistinguishable from any of the other incarcerated individuals creates a further dispossession from the self. Identity formation “is particularly important in the prison context, where the prisoner experiences his identity being stripped from him, thus becoming tattooed is crucial in order for a convict to establish an identity vis a vis the prison establishment” (Demello 13). In the prison, where resources are few and opportunities for self-expression are extremely limited, tattoos become a way for individuals to achieve self-completion and a form of identity.

Gang identity revolves largely around symbols, language, and iconography. Gang members attain part of their self-completion through tattoos that are agents of respect, action, inspiration, and status. Tattooing by some gangs parallels the tattooing associated with military members in that they act as ranking signifiers that place individuals in a hierarchy. Phelan and Hunt offer insight:

“Patterning their organizations upon military models, some gangs commission varying degrees of rank, have internal divisions (similar to distinctions between branches of service), produce subgroups marked by particular specializations, and decorate individual members for outstanding feats accomplished in the line of duty” (280).

As members in a gang wishing to prove their worthiness, the opportunity to acquire these “medals” reflects “a readiness to enact certain classes of behavior” (Phelan and Hunt 279). If gang members have not yet reached a certain ‘rank,’ certain tattoos push them to commit certain acts in order to accomplish goals and move up, gaining the opportunity for new tattoos. For example, in the Chicano prison gang, Nuestra Familia, which is primarily rooted in California, there are ranks that members go through. Before being considered for membership, an initiate must have a sponsor. They can be awarded particular tattoos, such as the one in Figure 6, and that will show their dedication and commitment to the gang, but they have not acted out deeds that prove that commitment (Phelan and Hunt 286).

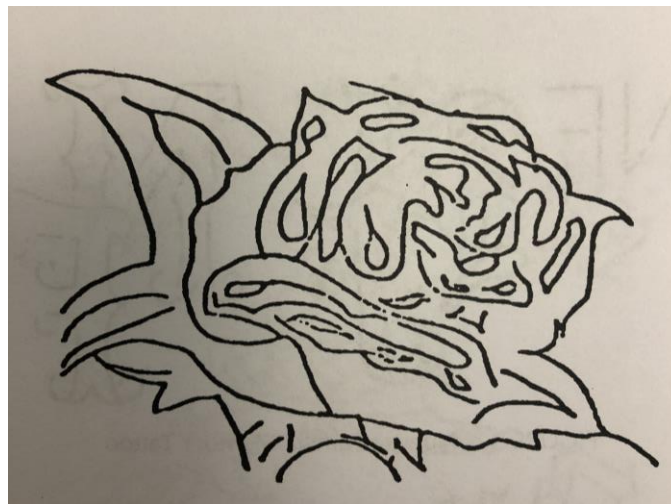


Figure 6 Nuestra Familia Initiate Tattoo

Once an initiate has attained membership, or the title of soldier, an individual must acquire three kills in order to move up to Lieutenant. Thus, these tattoos serve as motivation to complete these acts because a gang member attains self-completion and agency through their rank in the gang. Through the *kairotic* opportunity of committing these acts and attuning to the prison environment, the incarcerated find self-completion and combat the dehumanizing assemblage by re/discovering their humanity and value within the visual rhetoric of tattoos. This

is only achieved when acquiring the badges of honor, such as that in Figure 7 (Phelan and Hunt 287).

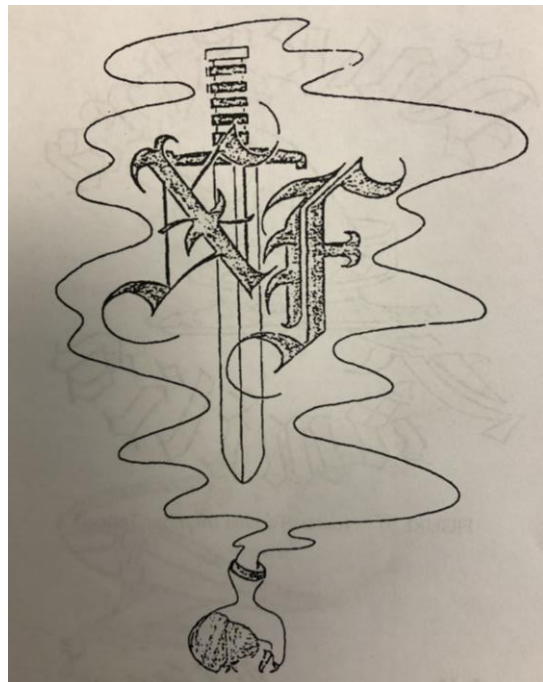


Figure 7 Nuestra Familia Member Tattoo

When individuals become Lieutenants, their next goal is Captain, which requires five kills. Incarcerated individuals with these tattoos are “forced to become militant revolutionaries to live up to the expectations of their keepers and peers” (Belsky 33). If a gang member does not show interest in acquiring a higher rank, their commitment to the gang may be doubted. Therefore, once an initiate has achieved their first tattoo, they must keep working towards self-completion—towards the next tattoo. If not, there may be repercussions to their lack of effort within the gang.

There is a power that comes with attaining tattoos while in prison. Even if in prison, the military ranking system still stands when in a gang. The initial shock of entering an environment where one does not know anyone else is lost when familiar tattoos are recognized on other men. With these tattoos, the ranking system is transferred inside of the prison. Thomas Rickert writes,

“The environment is always situating us in arrangements that simultaneously unleash some possibilities and foreclose on others” (96). In prison, opportunities for agency and autonomy are low. Freedom has been foreclosed upon the incarcerated. However, these individuals have used *kairos* and tattoos as a rhetorical tool to invade a territory that was created to hinder their ability to congregate and form alliances with each other. They have conquered a territory with their mainstream iconographies by taking their environment and using material environs as co-inventors of their in-prison caste system. Where the government has taken these men’s power, they fight back by creating their own unwritten laws to function and flourish throughout the prison institution.

Respect of the Art

Tattoos, even if just images on skin, are a “real thing that sparks traceable consequences in the world” and have an ability to “induce change in thought, feeling, and action” (Gries 11). A tattoo not only dictates the way the person who is tattooed behaves within the prison, it also acts as an agent in how other individuals view and treat that person. For instance, the incarcerated tattoo their bodies with symbols that represent facilities where they have done their time. For the higher security prisons, a tattoo symbolizing that environment leads other incarcerated individuals to fear *and* respect those men by just looking at them. For example, Rey got a tattoo of a prison tower that was in a very old unit he was assigned to. “The fence represents getting trapped in this unit. It was called Red Bricks. The whole tower was inside only and one long hallway. If someone else had been there, they knew which unit it was when they saw it. They knew what I had to go through and the things I had to do while serving my time.”



Figure 8 Red Bricks

In addition to where, tattoos are also designed to convey how long an individual was incarcerated. For those with many years of prison time, other incarcerated individuals held them to a higher respect than those who were new or had only served a few months' time. Going into prison, Guero did not have any tattoos. It was easy for him to join the group of men that just wanted to serve their time in peace because there were not any markers binding him to a gang. However, once in prison, Guero wanted a tattoo in order to “remember the time lost in prison.”



Figure 9 Guero's Full Tattoo

Prison tattoos detailing time served are common amongst many of the current and formerly incarcerated. In the Zone, “no one needs to ask how long his cellmate is in for—the number of cupolas tattooed on his skin tells the story. Each cupola, a reproduction of the onion-shaped domes of Russian churches, represents either a term or year served in the Zone” (24). As shown in Figure 11, one man is serving a seven-year sentence.

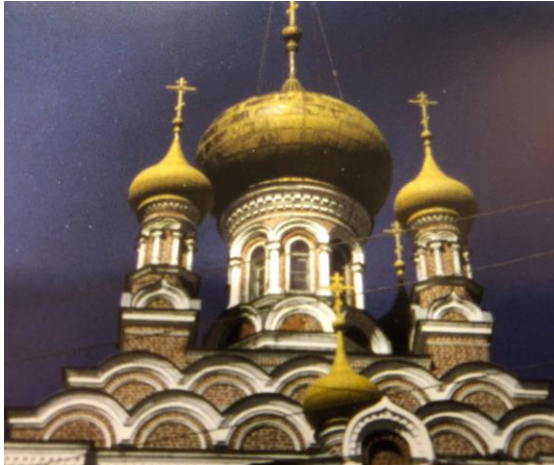


Figure 10 Cupolas



Figure 11 Seven Years Cupola Tattoo

Similarly, Guero participates in this type of symbolic tattooing. However, instead of images of cupolas engraved into the skin, he has cell bars. In Figure 12, Guero explains how each cell bar represents how many terms he has served in prison. From the image, we know immediately that he has gone to prison three times. Furthermore, in Figure 13, the years burning above the clock on fire represent the time that he has spent wasted in prison. Guero says, “Whenever I walk around, other men who were also in prison know what my tattoo means. They nod their heads to me in understanding. We don’t talk or even shake hands, but there is an unspoken respect that is given because they know what I went through.” I asked Guero why he decided to get the tattoo. He said he did it for himself. He had no intentions of trying to prove himself to others. However, later on, he knew the rhetorical effect that his tattoo would have on

his prison life when he was transferred during his first term and when he would return to prison for his second and third terms.



Figure 12 Cell Bars



Figure 13 Burning Time

Guero recalls:

“When I got transferred to another prison, I didn’t know anybody. Guys like to try to take advantage as soon as they can in order to steal your commissary or use you for chores and things like that. When we were all in the showers, they recognized my tattoo and immediately, they all backed off me. Men respected that time. They respected me.”

Thus, the tattoo—the image—conveyed a rhetorical meaning to other incarcerated men that those on the outside were unaware of. In the environment of the prison, Guero knew that his tattoo was a large factor in how he was treated, and later, how he was able to gain roles of responsibility and power. Guards put Guero in positions that he would have never attained on his

own if it were not for that tattoo. The visual allowed for him to re/gain a sense of the agency and human essence that he once had before. Guero explains how his tattoo changed his prison experiences:

“After that experience, I always made sure my tattoo could be seen. A guard noticed it and got to talking to me. He asked about where I had served. We got along and when it was time to choose the cell block manager, he chose me. That meant that I was in charge of telling which men to do what. I chose who had to clean, who had to wash, mop, and do hard work. After that, the guards always came to me when they needed something. They trusted me. And if I ever needed anything, they would help me out, too. The men, well they made sure not to make me angry because they would get stuck cleaning toilets. If it were not for my tattoo, I don’t know if I would have gotten that opportunity.”

The rhetorical power of Guero’s tattoo encouraged Guero to use *kairos*. He attuned to the environment and acknowledged the rhetorical value that embodied his tattoo. Because of it, his agency within the prison became vital to how he was seen and treated by the incarcerated and by guards.

Rey also had tattoos that showed the calendar years that he lost. Arrested at 18, he spent most of his young adulthood (almost 7 years) in prison. He explained his experience with this type of tattoo, “People see that and if they add it up and you’ve spent more time in there than they have, they don’t fuck with you. Some guys will try to but it’s very rare. There’s just something about knowing that the other dude has wasted even more time than you in this shithole that keeps people from beating on them.” The following images only show his dates of incarceration from 2011-2015.



Figure 14 Years 11-12



Figure 15 Years 13-15

There were some men, Guero said, that had their arms full of cell bars. Those men, of course, were given more respect. They were the veterans of the system and they earned it by doing their time. More than respect, protection is something that is necessary in order to survive in prison.

Gallo explained in Phillips's article:

“If you have to be in [prison] for five years or two years? That’s hell, girl. And then always having to watch your back. You know, and make sure that nobody comes and stabs you, or tries to rape you or whatever, you know. You’re walking around like that, in fear and everything. You know, you’re living your life in fear” (373).

A tattoo on the back of the neck can protect against rape, a known gang symbol can make men fear you, and a tattoo detailing your time spent in prison can give you back the respect you lost in order to have a smoother sentence. That is what happened with Guero. Seven years in prison was not easy, but his tattoo offered him one point of access to the agency he once had on the outside

and finding it on the inside. Tattoos are used to construct power where power is hidden behind steel bars and concrete floors.

Guero was able to experience the re/emergence of agency that his tattoo re/created; however, he was not able to experience the agency that emerged within gang tattoos. He did observe it though.

“The guards treated those covered in gang symbols with a lot more respect than the rest of us. They were scared of them. They didn’t want to start any problems with them because they knew that they could make things very difficult and very dangerous within the prison. The guards want to get on their good side. They work for them, too. The gang members will ask them, ‘Can you bring me cigarettes?’ or ‘Can you do this or that for me?’ The guards do it. They kind of controlled them in a way.”

This is very similar to what Phelan and Hunt discovered in their own study of the Nuestra Familia gang in prisons. The guards, knowing that Nuestra Familia members bear their accomplishments and ranks, will “approach such an inmate with increased caution” (Phelan and Hunt 286). This reversal of power mirrors Cintron’s reversal of mainstream images’ meanings. The incarcerated have used mainstream images to create their own meanings and transferred those meanings inside of the prison. By doing so, the circulation of those images have unleashed an agency back to the incarcerated where they have created their own system within a system, conquering their conquerors.

For Rey, since he was in a gang, his body was branded with gang affiliated tattoos. This made it a lot easier for the rhetorical agency of his tattoos to take effect since everywhere men looked at his body, there was some message being told.

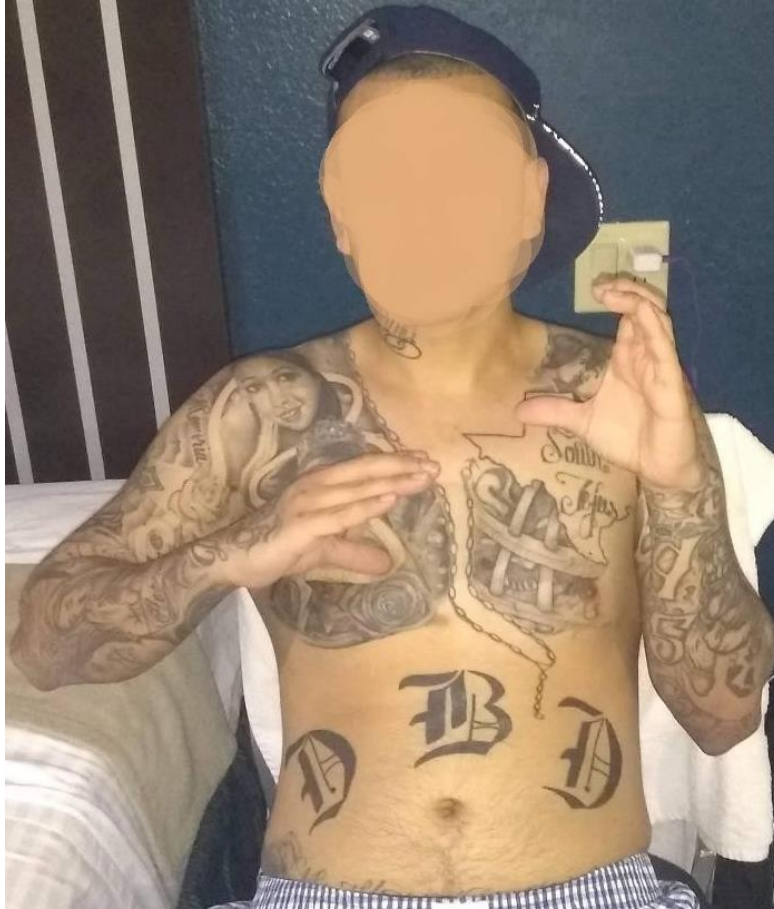


Figure 16 DBD Full Body



Figure 17 Death Before Dishonor

Rey's tattoo, Death Before Dishonor, shows his dedication to the gang life. It incites fear towards other incarcerated individuals because they know immediately that he would rather die than to

dishonor his gang. In another tattoo, Rey explains: “The temple has an entrance and an exit. Blood in, blood out.” Rey also has a tattoo expressing his pride in his race. It shows that his “kind” are those he protects first. In all three cases, Rey’s tattoos act as agents for revealing and maintaining his identity as a proud and loyal PTB and Mexican-American man, reigniting some of the lost humanity that entering prison brought upon him.

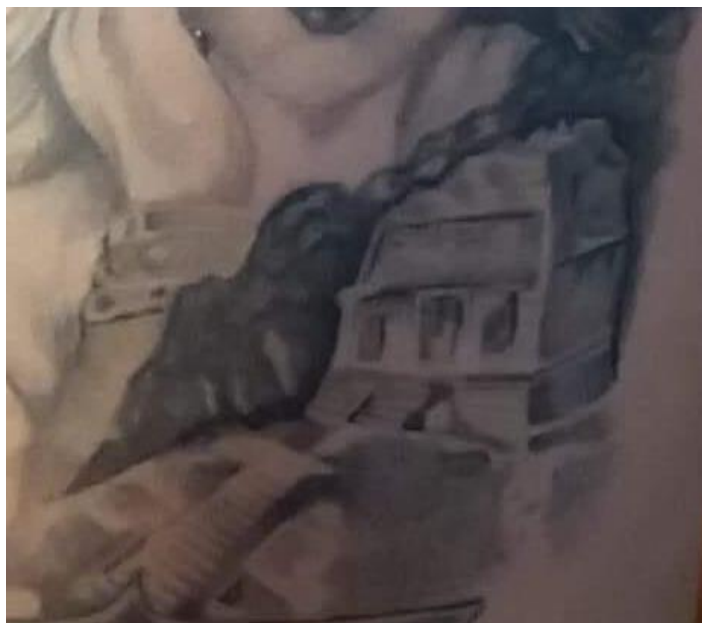


Figure 18 Blood In, Blood Out



Figure 19 Upper Back Brown Pride



Figure 20 Lower Back Brown Pride

JJ was transferred to about 5 different prisons during his term. He went from aggravated to non-aggravated institutions. His experiences mirror Guero's. I asked how JJ made friends, to which he replied, "It all just depends on what kind of person you are. Are you violent? Are you non-violent? Do you want to be hanging around guys that can get you in trouble or do you just want to do your time and leave? From there, you know who to hang out with." To that I asked, "Well, how do you know which guys are which?" JJ answered without any hesitation, "You'll see certain symbols tattooed on them. Spiders, clubs, just a bunch of gang symbols. You know those are the guys not to mess with unless you want to be associated with that kind of life." Instantly, just by acknowledging a certain image on another's body, one is able to know who they are and what they are capable of doing.

Although JJ had said that the guards' jobs were to be assholes, there were special cases in which the guards treated some men differently than others. JJ explained:

"Gang members. Those with tattoos all over their bodies: arms, chest, face. They were treated with, basically, more respect. You gotta remember that these guys are in prison doing hard time. They've killed. They don't care. The guards treat

them nicer. Still strict but with more respect. Us that were trying to do our time and get the hell out were treated harder. They knew we'd be scared. We'd listen. But those guys, it's their house already. They knew not to make them angry."

As with Cintron's gang graffiti, tattoos have become a form of literacy that has overwritten the authoritative system. Cintron writes:

"In taking over these (public) spaces, it created a kind of 'rulership'—a loaded and potent term in the context of gang life. Such rulership declared through the medium of graffiti not only who controlled the hood, but simultaneously and implicitly established a new set of rules that violated those of conventional print space" (174).

Gangs have found ways to use rhetoric through bodily art. Although tattoos may be mainstream practices, the use of tattoos as a rhetorical tool to communicate across people, gangs, towns, cultures, and environments is not as mainstream. The incarcerated utilize what they are familiar with on the outside to recreate the same hierarchy inside of the prison. Alix Lambert writes, "Much of your street credentials will be readily visible on your skin, the tattoos—or lack thereof—vouching for your criminal past" (8). Gang symbols were simple signifiers in finding which men were dangerous.

Phelan and Hunt explain the desire for tattoos within the Nuestra Familia gang as a means towards contributing towards a more complete self-definition. These military paralleled tattoos visually communicate gang "membership, status, rank, and personal accomplishments, which typically revolve around murder, drug trafficking and other crimes" (280). Therefore, when an incarcerated individual within the Nuestra Familia has a "Veteran" or "Superior" styled

tattoo, shown in Figures 21 and 22, they are shown deep respect within the prison because the tattoos denote their high level of status within the gang (Phelan and Hunt 291).

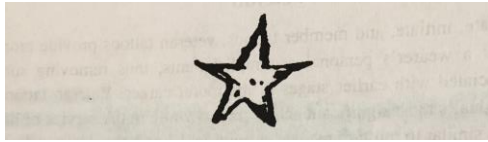


Figure 21 Nuestra Familia Veteran Tattoo

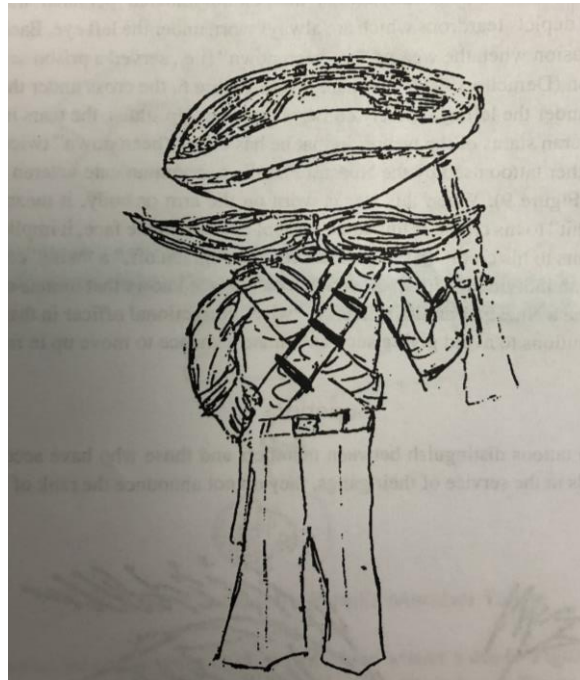


Figure 22 Nuestra Familia Superior Tattoo

Tattoos serve as an agent that demand respect within the prison. “Veteran tattoos indicate some of an individual’s most significant achievements...they are similar to military medals, providing decorations as rewards to ‘deserving’ individuals and lifting up role models for the rest of the group” (Phelan and Hunt 290). When entering into a prison where individuals have not set up their position, these badges of honor and distinction announce to others that they have power and authority. They reflect a person’s past career accomplishments and possible future career objectives. Tattoos are an agent in ensuring that respect is acknowledged and given. More than that, these tattoos also serve as a humanizing literacy as those tattooed find their self-completion and purpose through them. Being acknowledged as having rank or deserving of respect resists

the dispossession that the prison environment unleashes upon the incarcerated. Those incarcerated offer up their respect to these individuals and look to them as role models and leaders. This is how autonomy is re/created and power in the prison maintained. Moreover, it guarantees at least some form of protection against other incarcerated individuals because a power emerges from the tattoo that controls how a person is seen and thus treated.

Tattoos are a form of agency that situate a person into a niche that they are familiar with—power. Rickert argues, “The writer is caught in a network of complex, co-adaptive threads that disrupt any sense of autonomy or boundary” (903). Prison walls are supposed to hinder an individual’s ability to make decisions. However, tattoos make it possible for the hierarchy of agency to be disrupted. Where guards should have complete control, there are non-human factors affecting their own actions towards particular prisoners. Because of that, the guards are essentially saying, “These tattooed guys need more respect than those without them.” Their tattoos are means of safety, power, and identity.

Thus, tattoos are forces that give autonomy back to the incarcerated in an environment where everything else has been taken from them. The body serves as a canvas where “identity, aesthetics, protection and economics together combine to offer the incarcerated a measure of control over their self-definition and life experiences” (Phillips 368). Jailhouse iconography is the rhetoric by which the incarcerated who have become objects within the prison system reclaim their respect, their identity, and their power by taking advantage of the environment around them.

Power Twice Taken

Tattoos not only work as agents of power for individuals but also as agents of power against them. Regardless of location, bearing a gang tattoo that was not “earned” can be

detrimental to the safety of the incarcerated. Rey revealed that there are severe punishments that range from getting beat up to being killed. If not killed, the chances of regaining respect after such an instance is unlikely. Guero told of what happens to those with tattoos not earned, “When they see you with a tattoo that belongs to their gang, these guys go up to you and ask why you have it. If you’re not in the gang, they make you get rid of it. You have to cover it up. From then on, those guys are always treated a little rough since they gave off a bad first impression.” Thus, the power naturally allotted to human beings at birth is taken—twice. Further, Rey also discussed the consequences of “fan tattoos”:

“Some men, poor guys, came in for things that weren’t related to gangs. They’re fans of football or basketball or baseball or whatever. They have the same tattoos as us. The only difference is that we have those tattoos to show who we are. They have it because they like it. That causes a lot of problems for the new ones coming in. They get mistaken for being Texas Syndicates if they have longhorns, PTBs if they have stars, and so on. If you don’t get the chance to explain yourself, you’re in for it bad.”

Scot Barnett explains that “matter and objects are...active and suasive forces in their own rights” (2). The nonhuman has just as much potential for agency as a human being. In this environment, however, where opportunities for the human to engage with that agency are limited, the nonhuman image takes on greater force and greater rhetorical agency. While tattoos can act as salvation, particular images may further impede upon the incarcerated individual’s ability to form identity, gain respect, or simply have a prison sentence without any problems. Tattoos are a different language once in the prison setting. The meanings on the outside do not transfer to the inside. Inside, it is a language of contested powers, defense, protection, and

respect. The incarcerated, who claim those mainstream iconographies as their own, are using *kairos* and visual rhetoric to control newly incarcerated individuals through their fear and lack of knowledge of this environment, this system within a system, in order to maintain a hierarchy and a sense of agency.

Re/Creating Dwelling

Ambience places environment, language, and body into interactions that are coadaptive. When individuals first enter the prison, they are in an environment completely unknown to them. Their homes, their people, their security is lost. The prison is not a place of welcoming. It is four cold walls and cement floors. JJ was in prison for about 9 months total. He spent those nine months travelling from prison to prison, so he says that he was not able to learn as much about the culture than those who serve their time in one prison. One thing he did learn the moment he walked into the prison was that, as a prisoner, “you’re just a dog in a cell.” However, tattoos offer a possibility and opportunity to turn this prison—a place of dehumanization—into a dwelling place for the incarcerated.

During the interview, I asked JJ, “Why do you think men in prison got tattoos?” JJ responded, “Those guys want you to know that they killed someone. They want you to know they’re tough. So yeah, they have tattoos and you know what they stand for. Other guys just want to feel like they belong to something.” The incarcerated, away from the familiar, their homes, their zones of power, have found ways to re/create a dwelling in places where comfort is not something desired for its guests.

Guero went into prison not wanting any problems. He would abide by the rules, was in charge of his cell hall, and was a trusted individual by both guards and other incarcerated men. However, coming into the prison was a scary experience. He says:

“I did not know what to expect my first time in. Some men came up to me asking if I wanted to be part of the gangs or [pointing across the room] part of them—the *Solanos*—men who were just serving their time. Being in a gang got me here, and I didn’t want more time, so I told them I wanted to be with the *Solanos*. We protected each other. They taught me the rules inside the prison. They showed me whom to avoid and who was okay to associate with. From then on, whenever I saw a new prisoner, I would go up to them asking the same.”

Guero described how his choice left him without feeling connected to any person in particular. He had a job and a duty while in prison, men respected him, but his dispossession from others remained, even if his dispossession from himself had been reverted thanks to the responsibilities allotted to him due to his tattoos. He reflected, “I wanted to have that brotherhood they had, but being in a gang got me there. I didn’t want to stay there. I knew if I had joined, I would have had to do things I didn’t want to. Get in more trouble. So I chose to be a *Solano*.” Similarly, I asked about Rey’s affiliation with gang life and how they interact within the prison. Much of what he said was similar to Guero’s experience:

“When you first come in, everyone’s coming up to you asking if you want to join them. The gangs will tell you the *reglas* of the prison. Who you are allowed to sit with, where you can sit, what areas to stay away from, what you have to do, etc. If you decide you want to live by those rules, you join them. They’ll protect you. If you choose otherwise, then you’re a *Solano*. You choose to stay out of that stuff. Those guys don’t have tattoos. They don’t have much help besides each other.”

In Rey’s experience, dwelling was created through the commonality of race, geography, and goals, which were communicated through tattoos. The *Solanos* were alone in their prison

ventures. When someone was picking a fight with them, both men stated that no one helped. They had a chance to be a part of the gangs and denied it. For Rey, he observed how gangs re/created their dwellings.

“Take me for example. I had the 956 tattoo and the *South Tejas* one, too.

Immediately, other men knew where I was from and could recognize whether I would be an ally or an enemy. My first day there, they came up to me and I joined with my gang. Our men patrolled our territories and were able to tell when those not allowed were trespassing. They had Nazi symbols, longhorns, spiders, whatever. If it was a gang we weren’t associating with, we made sure they knew whose territory they were walking on.”



Figure 23 “956”



Figure 24 *South Tejas*

The tattoos are agents in who is allowed where in the prison. They are agents that demand respect when circulating through specific parts of the prison.

In a system designed to make individuals feel like outsiders and objects, the incarcerated counteract this as they come together to flourish and “come together in the continual making of a place; at the same time, that place is interwoven into the way they have come to be as they are—and as further disclosed through their dwelling practices” (Rickert xiii). Their behaviors and ways of being are intertwined in this environment. Phillips writes: “When gang members first enter prison they lose the security associated with their neighborhood place. Fellow homeboys, the regular people they hang out with, and the places that they know must all be rearticulated within the compressed ambiguities of the ‘four brick walls’” (362). Therefore, the incarcerated blanket their bodies with the protective power that tattoos create, re/creating the familiar in the cold prison setting.

The prison context has a very specific culture that not only gives power, respect, protection, and identity, but creates an abode. “Without a tattoo, prisoners often feel isolated, both from their friends at home as well as from other convicts” (Demello 13). For this reason, tattoos are agents with a force that urge the human to get tattooed. Furthermore, tattoos are agents that make claim on individuals and generate a strong sense of place. Lambert explains a very similar experience to Rey and Guero amongst prisoners in the Zone, “Other inmates explain things to him about the camp he is being sent to. What are the codes, what are their consequences, what is allowed” (15). As we can see from both experiences, prison culture is very much the same all over the world. There are a set of rules, both spoken and unspoken, known and unknown, that the incarcerated must learn and abide by in order to survive. The prison, an environment with “formerly secure walls, become[s] permeable” and the incarcerated are agential in their aim towards their own kind of order (Rickert 914).

Creating a dwelling grants the incarcerated's new world a kind of meaning and value that holds power in the conditions that the environment creates. When researching Chicano prison gangs, Olguin discusses how Chicano *Tatuajes* link the incarcerated to their people—*La Raza*—and other “people in struggle throughout the world” (195). Creating a commonality amongst fellow men allows for the harsh and hostile prison to feel like a home where one can thrive and flourish. “Existing street affiliations communicated through tattoos, allow people to bring the protective power of the neighborhood inside the prison by blanketing their skin with the familiar” (Phillips 363). One male, Raul Salinas, that Olguin interviews expresses his defiance through *Tatuajes*. “Without these familiar marks of distinction, he not only would be an outsider but would not have the knowledge and conviction that currently make him such a successful organizer and powerful ally” (Olguin 195). Tattoos create a culture within the prison and gang context that connects individuals through a commonality of criminality, opposition to ‘The Man’, and a desire for the familiar.

A dwelling is created amongst familiar gangs but there are moments when the whole prison becomes a dwelling designed to protect each participant, apart from gang affiliation, race, or any other things that would usually cause hate, issues, or separation. Aside from the familiar, the incarcerated desire to have a shared goal. Rey explains, “I gave tattoos to everyone, no matter the gang they were with. Only ones I didn't touch were Texas Syndicates. Puro Tango Blasts don't affiliate with them. But anyone else, it didn't matter. I'd tattoo them.” This dwelling occurs when tattooists, tattooees, and point men (lookouts) gather together to protect each other and to successfully tattoo someone. “This simple act of transgression—‘covering’ for each other—sometimes transcends the strong racial stratification among prisoners” (Olguin 173). At this point, all men are in a state of collaboration against the system. There have been cases of white

supremacists getting tattooed by ethnic individuals, cross-gang tattooings, etc., because defying ‘The Man’ in that moment, is more important than their differences. In this dwelling, there is no hostility towards each other, only a common goal towards a tattooed “convict” body.

Living in a dehumanizing assemblage, the incarcerated are forced to find a means for physical and mental survival. Rickert writes, “Dwelling arises with craft and the acquisition of skill, but these in turn emerge through an attuned engagement with the surroundings, all of which generate a strong sense of place” (240). Rey and Gallo, along with other in-prison tattoo artists, use their craft to create a home. Through *kairos*, these men have found an opportunity to awaken an agency that the prison has been continuously trying to silence and destroy. Furthermore, not just tattooing, but getting tattooed has created a literary caste system within a system in this world within a world. The human, in this dehumanizing assemblage, is not afforded the same value anymore. It is the nonhuman and the environment that are able to re/create a sense of place, identity, agency, and reverse the dispossession that the incarcerated have undergone. Objects of punishment, state property, and “criminals,” these beings utilize the nonhuman tattoo as a *kairotic* rhetorical device in order to re/create their dwellings.

CHAPTER IV

THE HUMANIZING LITERACY EVENT: THE POWER OF LANGUAGE AND LANGUAGE AS POWER

Literacy Event Emerging

When human beings are referred to as state property and when institutions are created in order to keep the criminal segregated from the public, the possibility for having any opportunities for rhetoric, power, or identity become almost impossible. However, in an institution created to silence, the incarcerated have found ways to fight back this dehumanizing assemblage. Understanding Cintron's work with gangs and graffiti, there is a clear relation with how the incarcerated engage in rhetorical and literate practices in order to combat the objectification of who they are, how they are treated, and how others will see them, now and in the future, through the use of tattoos as creative rhetorical, literacy devices. This has created what I will call the *humanizing literacy event*. In this chapter, I will argue how the humanizing literacy event has been unfolding, functioning, and disrupting the way that the prison system works for years, and how it has created an avenue for the incarcerated to share their counterstories and disrupt a narrative that has left them bereft of agency, identity, and humanity in the eyes of much of society.

Michelle Baliff analyzes what constitutes an event in her article entitled, *Writing the Event: The Impossible Possibility for Historiography*. She writes that an event is one that "ruptures." It is deemed as something impossible to occur. "Its singularity interrupts an order and

rips apart, like every decision worthy of the name, the normal fabric of temporality or history” (Baliff 245). The order that has been ruptured, interrupted, and ripped apart is the prison order. Individuals gave up their rights once they stepped foot in the prison. The four brick walls changed the way they were used to living. Now, the incarcerated have changed the way they *prison* forever, by doing the impossible—creating a voice, identity, and agency within the institution that has stripped them of it.

In regards to history, the prison has always been one meant to punish. As stated before, the incarcerated are state property. The first prisons in the US understood the power of language and thus, forbade the incarcerated to speak to others. However, it was never foreseen, predicted, or knowable that the incarcerated would end up finding alternative methods to use the language of power and transform it into language *as* power. It was never foreseen, predicted, or knowable that the incarcerated would use the power of language and transform it into power *as* language. In the prison, the incarcerated have used tattoos as a form of language to re/create agency. “Those who sit behind bars consider a tattoo to be a second passport” (Lambert 38). They gain their power through the images that are etched on their skin. The language of tattooing and the knowledge one needs in order to take advantage of it are exclusive, not known by the mainstream. Thus, not only is language power but power is language. An incarcerated individual is not allowed power unless they know the language. Unless they have that power written on them. This culture is an “embodied nonlinear self-organizing system interacting with the surround” (Cooper 421). The environment is suffocating but the incarcerated are fighting back.

More than an event, tattooing in the prison has become a literacy event. Literacy is generally understood as the ability to read and write. However, Shirley Brice Heath brings into play the nonmainstream literacy practices of communities. As with Cintron, Heath does an

ethnographic study to determine the different methods of literacy that individuals participate in to gain identity. In the community of Trackton, reading and writing are not practices that are primarily necessary to the success of an individual. Instead, it is the oral practices that one participates in that determines one's literacy ability. Heath explains, "Written information almost never stood alone in Trackton; it was reshaped and reworded into an oral mode" (377). Citizens of that community did not rely on the traditional; they created their own mode of literacy. Every environment, community, and culture has their own means of communication; they have their own means of attaining agency, identity, and respect. Their differing patterns of influence are forms by which one takes control over their lives.

As with Trackton, the incarcerated's literacy is different than that of the mainstream. They must "use nontraditional avenues for social communication," especially because of the high rates of mainstream illiteracy (McNaughton 134). Therefore, incarcerated individuals have found their own literacy event. A literacy event that was never foreseen. In this humanizing literacy event, the incarcerated have established a way to re/gain their humanity. They have taken their own pieces of writing—tattoos—and made them an integral part of the environment in which they live. It is their way of participating in the rhetorics of the everyday. However, as with Cintron's gangs, there is a "cultural knowledge needed to read the visual arguments of prison tattoos" (McNaughton 136). A specific type of decoding is necessary to survive in prison. The images etched on the skin of the incarcerated warns and protects. The images give and take. The images disrupt the power dynamics in the prison. The images give incarcerated individuals back a sense of autonomy in an environment and context specifically made to control.

The use of tattooing as a form of identity re/creation has created a literacy event that has disrupted the dehumanizing assemblage and forged a path for the incarcerated to use the visual

as a means of power and humanization. The humanizing literacy event is an “on-going multiple channeled stream of stimuli” by which the incarcerated determine and practice the rules they have created through their own visual interactions. For those individuals, such as Rey and Guero, who gained more respect and power because of the tattoos that their skin displayed, the authority did not rest in the person, but in the relationship between the person and the image. The nonhuman acted alongside the human. These images—things—“provoke thought, incite feeling, circulate affects...they are vibrant actors, enacting effects that exceed human agency and intentionality” (Barnett and Boyle 2). Authority does not lie within a person only or a thing only. Authority dwells amongst the complex relationships of its environment and the factors inhabiting it. In the context of the prison, where keeping one’s humanity is tough enough, those with tattoos have created a hierarchy of power that defies what the government has imparted upon these individuals. Thomas Rickert describes the “House of Language” (in a way that can be applied to the humanizing literacy event) as:

“the bringing together of different ideas and experiences from different people, places, and times, also conforms to the logic of complexity: all these strands combine and recombine, continuously adapting and re-adapting to each other, moving to points far from equilibrium, perhaps to a tipping point where transformation, and a new level of order emerges” (914).

The incarcerated have re/discovered their humanity. Through nonmainstream backgrounds, the incarcerated have been able to shift literate traditions and create a means by which they reveal their truths, create rules, dwellings, and fight back against a system aimed to smother their agency. In essence, the humanizing literacy event is one in which it is recognized that neither the human nor the nonhuman have authority. Rather, it is through their complex and

nuanced relationship within an entangled web of factors where authority is created through their relationships with each other—that authority giving power and humanizing the individuals in that particular assemblage. The humanizing literacy event restores connections to rhetorical agency that were previously stripped of and denied, inviting the human back into a network where their presence unlocks potential for new agencies to emerge in conditions where it may not have been predicted to occur. Thus, in the prison environment that disconnected the incarcerated from rhetorical practices, the nonhuman and human forged connections and relationships that allowed for conditions to transform and for agencies to emerge from the shadows of control.

Counternarrative Within the Dehumanizing Assemblage

History is fragmentation. Parts of it are forgotten, overlooked, erased, or misremembered. Chris Lorenz explains, “History is memory, inspiration and commonality and a nation without memory is every bit as adrift as an amnesiac wandering the streets. History matters, and we forget this truth at our peril” (26). When history is fragmented, the identities of those that are misrepresented are also fragmented. Because of that, individuals are left with “limited identities” (Lorenz 26). However, the humanizing literacy event has acted as a rupture in the prison system. Ralph Cintron writes, “The result of this action [in this case, tattooing] is that a flaw, a fault line, is implanted in whatever has been ordered, and the flaw has the potential to collapse the structure that harbors and maintains it, whether the structure is the self, a text, or a social system” (x). In this case, it is all three. Through tattooing, the formerly incarcerated have found the flaw that enables them to re/discover the self, dissolve the force of the written laws, and penetrate the walls of the prison with a language made their own.

In the prison system, master narratives of who the incarcerated are and what prisons do have allowed for the further fragmentation and erasure of the marginalized voice of the incarcerated. The incarcerated are in prison because they are bad people—they *must* be bad. However, their stories are being told through the mouths of those that put them there and from the mouths of those that are keeping them there. Aja Y. Martinez describes counterstories as a means by which “voices from the margins become the voices of authority in the researching and relating of our own experiences” (33). Tattoos serve as a form of counternarratives since each tattoo conveys meaning that grants power, takes power, and re/creates identity. The incarcerated do not have a voice inside the prison. They lose the ability to speak for themselves once they step foot inside this dehumanizing assemblage. However, they have created a platform in order to re/develop one. Tattoos are agents of communication for incarcerated individuals to tell their story and create an opening for themselves in a society actively trying to shut them out.

“Legitimate knowledge” is often considered as academic knowledge. Work done by scientists, scholars, and those who have had educational opportunities. Nonmainstream literacy practices are often unrecognized, ignored, and further marginalized. Those in power and those that are educated are those that write the history. They are the ones that determine what is legitimate and what is not. Legitimate knowledge does not come from “ex-convicts.” Cheryl Glenn argues for the remapping of rhetorical territory. In her article, Glenn argues that there is a power politics of gender. “Men have acted in the polis, in the public light of rhetorical discourse, determining philosophic truth, civic good, the literary canon, and the theories and praxes of rhetoric” (Glenn 1). Men have marginalized women. Those brave women who try to make their way into the rhetorical sphere “will be used, misappropriated, and long ignored” (Glenn 3). In much the same way, society has marginalized the incarcerated. Seen as threats to public safety,

uneducated, and agents of malice acts, the incarcerated cannot possibly contribute to the academic rhetorical sphere. However, while we cannot transcend what has been created, our knowledge of the prison and incarcerated individuals can be “understood and rearranged” (Saldanha 9). Foreigners in this realm, the incarcerated’s voices have been marginalized, silenced, and ignored enough. We must rethink what it means to have rhetorical power. We must rethink what it means to have agency. Tattoos and the incarcerated are the counternarrative to this. Together, both provide a channel for revealing the truth of their history.

Through the *kairos* of tattooing, the incarcerated are able to establish a counternarrative when all ambient and human forces are working to create one for them. The humanizing literacy event allows for the further spread of knowledge and language. “When people are illiterate, then they write down in tattoos that here is what we love and this is what destroys us” (37). Tattoos are the means by which those who have not had the fortune of learning to read and write with words are able to share their stories. Tattoos tell the history of an individual’s life, from how many sentences they have served to where they served them, from who they have killed, addictions they have had, to groups they have been/are a part of. Tattoos serve as sites of memory for the incarcerated to write their autobiographies. These tattoos act as “‘a kind of counter-reality’ created/experienced by ‘outgroups’ subordinate to those atop the...hierarchy” (Martinez 38). These tattoos serve as a means of counterstorytelling that comes from those whose experiences are not often told and from those who directly experienced it.

Collectively, the tattoos that the incarcerated receive serve as public histories that circulate as the body moves through the prison, out in the public, and through time. Historically, those in power have been the ones that create the social order. Tattoos are reshaping the order of the prison. These iconic and symbolic representations tell a counterstory. In turn, each

counterstory joins the collective memory of all those incarcerated and formerly incarcerated to re/create history. Tattoos join those resisting the prison industry and advocating for human rights. Together, counterstories, collective memories, and the history that has already been shaped should be “seen as complementary terms” that help us understand how the prison system works, thrives, and affects others. In addition, how it helps us understand how the incarcerated combat their confinement by re/creating identity, respect, and dwelling.

This humanizing literacy event is a means for the incarcerated to rewrite their history, find a voice, and re/gain agency. As Cheryl Glenn states, “We ignored the borders of our map, the shadowy regions where roads run off the edge of the paper and drop away at sharp angles” (3). Through this form of counterstorytelling, the incarcerated are moving past their identities of statistics or unnamed individuals. The incarcerated are tattooing their lives, unconsciously forcing their way into a sphere that has been working to keep them out, while simultaneously complicating our understanding of what rhetoric is. The tattoo and the incarcerated are remapping our histories, redefining what it means to use rhetoric, and opening new channels of study in order to better understand what it means to be human.

Future Research

While there are many factors that limit my study, I believe that my research opens up opportunities for future case studies so that the formerly and currently incarcerated are given the opportunity to tell their counterstory towards a narrative that has been written for them. Furthermore, my research opens up minds to understanding the roles that ambient rhetoric, visual rhetoric, *kairos*, and counternarratives play in an individual’s life. Ambient rhetoric is vital to understanding the world: what was, what is, and what will be. Superficial observations of the environment can leave gaps in our understandings of significant issues. As with the prison,

without understanding the architecture, the location, the political atmosphere, the ventilating systems, the materials used to build the prison, etc., one ignores major factors into how the incarcerated are treated, how they are seen by themselves and others, and how we progress towards or away from humanizing behaviors and laws. The ambience of the prison is used as a form of rhetoric by the state to communicate to the incarcerated and to others the goals of that governmental system and society. Taken in conjunction with other issues, ambient rhetoric has the opportunity to not only open our eyes to how the environment affects us as individuals, ambient rhetoric also reveals the nuances of multiple assemblages, if given some of the spotlight. My thesis offers just a glimpse into the vast ways that ambience is used as a form of rhetoric that confines, transforms, and destroys assemblages.

The nonhuman is constantly not being afforded its value and worth. “Too often, we miss the opportunity to acknowledge the force of things because we assume they are inert tools used by human agents whom we typically credit with full-blown agency” (Gries 12). As with ambience, the nonhuman are widely ignored or seen as part of a subject/object dichotomy. While the nonhuman may not have the same potential agency as the human, their value in the vast assemblages must not be diluted. In my thesis, I have looked, primarily, at the nonhuman—the visual. The tattoo is a form of visual rhetoric whose thing-power is not fully recognized. Much like a book, the visual must be looked over multiple times before being truly understood. One must look into and analyze the nuances, the complexities, and the potential that it possesses in whatever assemblage it may occupy. Working alongside the human, rather than for it, the visual forges connections and relationships which allow for rhetorical agency to emerge. Within the prison, the tattoo was merely one factor that assembled in a collective existence with the prison, the guards, the incarcerated, and all the other factors caught in a web. However, without that

tattoo, the system in which the incarcerated lived would have evolved into something completely different than what we see today. My thesis emphasizes the importance of not only paying attention to the nonhuman but acknowledging its potential for transformative and rhetorical agency.

Through ambient and visual rhetoric, *kairos* and what it means opens up to a multitude of possibilities. There are countless agents inter-acting and intra-acting with each other. One must first acknowledge that humans and their relationship with other humans and/or nonhumans creates connections that unveil and/or hide possibilities that one would not have foreseen if not affording the nonhuman value. Furthermore, one must acknowledge that the environment, “a sea of forces flowing and rushing together, eternally changing, eternally flooding back,” is a major factor in how we see others, ourselves, the world, and how nonhuman entities’ relationships with us are molded and transformed by the surroundings (Rickert 89). With these acknowledgments, “*kairos* is not about mastery but instead concerns attunement to a situation...a gathering that springs forward” (Rickert 98). In my thesis, I unveiled only a very small part of the ways in which *kairos* unfolds and becomes embedded in the survival of human beings. *Kairos* is kinetic with its emerging agencies and possibilities. It changes and is always changing. The incarcerated have attuned to the new world around them, converted the roles of power, and used visual rhetoric as a means to unraveling the system that confines them, mentally, emotionally, and physically. My thesis shows how the incarcerated have created a humanizing literacy event by recognizing the nonhuman’s value, understanding the effect that the environment has on the dehumanizing assemblage, and using *kairos* to re/discover their humanity.

Counternarratives function as a method for the marginalized to resist the “master narratives” of those in power, those who make ignorant assumptions, and those who wish to hide

the truth. Those marginalized become voices of authority—writers of their own histories. My thesis acts as a form of counternarrative for three men: Guero, Rey, and JJ. Before I interviewed them, only their families had heard of their experiences in prison. Others, of course, know of their incarceration when they apply for jobs or housing. However, others have not seen past the title of “ex-convict” as all three men have struggled since their releases to find stable jobs. My thesis has offered them an opportunity to be heard and seen by an audience of scholars and to tell their counterstories to a master narrative that is given to many formerly incarcerated individuals. From the interviews conducted for my thesis, I learned that all three men were incredibly intelligent. Guero has a passion for carpentry and even showed me images of swings, picnic tables, and benches he had built. JJ loves to discuss politics. He mentioned how he tried to watch the news as much as he could while in prison to keep up to date. Rey has an extreme desire for the penal system to change. As I talked with him, I could feel his need for his words to be heard, for others to understand the pains that come with being in prison, and for change to actually occur. All of these characteristics, however, are, more often than not, overshadowed and erased when others see the prison tattoos or checked box that confirms they have been charged with a crime. In addition to Guero, Rey, and JJ being offered their chance to tell their counterstory. My thesis also acts as a counternarrative for many other incarcerated individuals. My thesis invites for scholars and all people to see the incarcerated as human beings first.

Moreover, my thesis invites for scholars and all people to understand the value and need for counterstorytelling. More than just their character, the counterstories that these men have told offer up truths to the way the prison system works. They have offered us an alternative perspective that deters from the master narrative and helps others to see the way the prison institution really works. That is what counterstorytelling does and why it is so important. Voices

that have been muted, marginalized, and villainized are able to counter the voices that are speaking for them. Master narratives can finally be pushed out of the spotlight as counterstorytelling offers opportunities for truths to be revealed and for positive changes to be enacted. Through my research, I have discovered how individuals use their environment and other nonhuman entities to create a humanizing literacy event. That humanizing literacy event acts as a counternarrative in each new environment within the dehumanizing assemblage. Tattoos within the environment of the individual's body act as a form of identity re/creation. As the tattoos circulate, the environment is expanded to the prison itself. Within that, an agency emerges through *kairos* that re/creates dwelling, unveils opportunities for success, and demands respect amongst other individuals. Again, as the tattoos continue to circulate, this humanizing literacy event sparks the creation of social hierarchies and reversal of powers. Where the guards were once controlling the incarcerated, the incarcerated now hold some control/respect of the guards. As circulation and environments continue to expand, the humanizing literacy event reaches outside of the prison, countering the narratives of those that first sought to marginalize the incarcerated. In this case, Rey, Guero, and JJ's tattoos circulated and reached me. As a result, this thesis was created. Now, I am circulating their counternarratives alongside them, as they have now entered into a different environment—the university. The humanizing literacy event serves as a counternarrative that continues to transform and ripple through the changing environments, changing its function, purpose, and effect on the individual and society.

Looking into ambience and the value of the nonhuman, I have shown how rhetoric is used in more ways than words and human action. Through the prison design and architecture, the identifying of the incarcerated as “Inmate”, and many other factors, dehumanization occurs and persists in prisons everywhere. Through the use of tattoos as visual rhetoric, my thesis opens up

opportunities for factors that may not have been acknowledged, understood, or even considered to be studied for their rhetorical value and effects on a dehumanizing assemblage. My thesis opens up a counternarrative for the nonhuman to be considered as equally valuable in its ability to embed itself in an assemblage and, through its relationship with other entities, transform, change, and even create a humanizing literacy event. Rickert quotes Heidegger, “Only when man becomes the subject do non-human beings become objects” (191). This thesis acts as a counternarrative and proof that the nonhuman are more than just objects. Humans have always been in subject positions, but the marginalized nonhuman are vital actants in the assemblages and understanding of our world.

As mentioned before, my research has many limitations. Since my thesis is focused on tattoos being used as a rhetorical tool, much was left out that could be of interest to many individuals. The prison system is a complex environment where the lives of many individuals are shaped, changed, and even ended. One area of interest that I was unable to research was that of the female prison experience. The experiences of women within the prison system are not much researched and I found it difficult to find texts that discussed female prison tattoos. That is one avenue future researchers may extend upon my work in order to discover what rhetoric is used to create a humanizing literacy event in that particular dehumanizing assemblage.

Although tattoos may have proven their influence in the past and still today, how much longer will tattoos uphold their meanings and agency? In my interview with Rey, he explained the generational gaps:

“Prisons are always changing. They’re the same but changing. The old guys are super respectful. You won’t ever hear them call someone a bitch or use the N-word. That ain’t how they hold themselves. You got all these other motherfuckers

though cussing every other word. They have no respect for others. But of course, each generation has their own way of living and being in the prison.”

Another extension could work off of the different generations of those incarcerated. In what ways does the prison support or oppose generational change? To much the same idea, how do tattoos change with the generations? In a constantly changing society where tattoos are more for aesthetic appeal, will that affect the literacy practices of the incarcerated? Will tattoos continue to have the same force as they do now? Will tattoos respected in the past or now have the same agency in the future? Do they still have the same agency now?

I analyzed how ambience affects an individual’s humanity, identity, and respect. However, thinking of *kairos*, how is the environment used intentionally and unintentionally by individuals? These include the incarcerated, guards, the law, country, and citizens. What about prison visits by family? Was there anything done to ensure that the person they were visiting maintained a sense of humanity or identity? Besides tattooing, what other forms of rhetoric were used to survive? How does race and social economic status affect one’s time in prison? What about the location of the prison? What is the difference in experiences of incarcerated individuals in low security versus high security prisons? What effects did gender and sexual orientation have on incarcerated individuals?

With my own research, there were still many unanswered questions as well. Was the environment the biggest factor in how an individual lost or re/gained their agency? In what other ways were the incarcerated made to be objects? Rey mentioned how there were many men who would offer sexual favors in order to attain tattoos, snacks, commissary, protection, etc. How did those men (and research can be done with women) objectify and dehumanize themselves in order to, ultimately, gain power? How does that system work? Rey also discussed his requirements for

tattooing: “Documentation had to be brought to me before I touched anyone. Bloodwork. I didn’t want to be spreading any diseases around.” I told him how honorable that was and that it was good that he had some sense of ethics. He replied, “You have to live by something. You have to have morals. You can’t just be an asshole and spread that shit around. It ruins lives. It kills people.” I found this an extremely admirable quality in Rey. It made me wonder what other ways those in prison keep their humanity or uphold their ethics and morals. What other actions or rules do they have?

In which prisons are tattoos more prominent and necessary for survival? How do these tattoos affect the formerly incarcerated outside of prison? Guero mentioned what happens when people see his tattoo in public, “They back away from me. They look away. They don’t want to have anything to do with me.” A similar experience was seen through Gallo as he was always a target for blame and police set-ups. Fear and disrespect followed these men around, permanently marked by their tattoos. The tattoos that were once their salvation are now their condemnation. More research in the effects of tattoos with the formerly incarcerated would open up opportunities for more counterstorytelling.

The biggest area of future research that I would like to see would be how different environments create different dehumanizing assemblages. What other forms of dehumanizing assemblages are out there? What factors are contributing to their creation? What forms of rhetoric are being used against individuals? From that, what forms of rhetoric are being used by the oppressed to counter this assemblage in order to create a humanizing literacy event? What nonhuman factors are complicating and disrupting the assemblage? As all of these are being discovered, in much the same way as my own research, what counterstories are being told and how are those narratives changing within space and time?

These are all questions that still remain in my mind upon completion of my research. However, these are all questions that do not have to remain unanswered. The prison setting is a highly complex assemblage that is entangled with various factors that interact with each other to create its image. My research has found the value of the nonhuman tattoo in the prison culture. Incarcerated individuals are able to re/gain their voice, identity, and respect, find a dwelling in a terrifying environment, and participate in a humanizing literacy event where all around them is a thriving dehumanizing assemblage. Power is constantly being contested in order to maintain some form of agency. The environment's power to affect and the effect of the tattoo are opposing factors in the prison context.

Conclusion

Objects and things that we would normally ignore or not see as active forces in our ways of being are vital to the success, the power, and the respect that an individual has. Moreover, these objects are significant factors towards the creation of a thriving and flourishing dwelling place. Tattoos are a form of iconography that give voice and autonomy to the incarcerated in a place where everything is taken from them. Tattoos have acted as a “form of relationality in which bodies-in relation experience themselves as both subject and object---as a ‘thing among things’” (Barnett, 6). Within this world in another world, tattooing within the prison by incarcerated individuals is a humanizing literacy event that has unfolded not only as a form of *kairos*, but as a counterstory aimed to combat the lack of respect and destruction of voice that individuals experience within the dehumanizing assemblage of the prison.

Tattoos have enabled the incarcerated to rearticulate themselves “as oppositional Subjects with human needs, desires, rights, and above all, counterhegemonic agency” (Olguin 164). Using what the environment has provided them, the incarcerated have proven just how powerful the

non-human can be, how taking advantage of your environment yields positive results, and how the use of images aids in the regaining/attaining of a voice in a setting whose aim is to silence. Chris S. Earle states, “Prisoners continue to find the means to address wider audiences, to resist their imprisonment, and to respond to the state and to dominant discourses. Prisoners reclaim voice and subjectivity by enunciating opposition to the state and by critiquing the very terms by which they have been dispossessed” (50).

The world is a web of entangled assemblages. The dehumanizing assemblage is just one of these. As Arun Saldanha puts it, “All the openness and complexity that are attributed to culture, language, and mind, are in fact merely peculiar instances of how the universe in its entirety works” (16). The prison has its culture, its language, and its mind. However, there must be a counterstory told from the insider point of view. Just as I misjudged who my uncle was based off biases that were unconsciously created, we must all take the conscious step to understanding the prison system for how it works, how it affects, and how it can be changed. Prisons should not be places of captivity; but places for rehabilitation. Sir Alexander Paterson famously said, “You cannot train men for freedom in a condition of captivity” (Madge, 367).

Upon thanking Rey for his participation in my research, he said, “Don’t mention it. It’s something that people will hopefully take time out of their day to try to understand and make the prison system a little better. It’s not a very nice place. It’s not a friendly place. Time will let us see that change and improvement.” The incarcerated are doing their time. The formerly incarcerated have done theirs. At what cost though? Those are things that those on the outside will never know unless the incarcerated and formerly incarcerated are given their chance to counter the narrative being created for them.

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Rebecca R. Reyes graduated from PSJA Memorial High School in May of 2012. She then, in December of 2015, graduated from the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley with a Bachelor of Art in English. In August of 2019, Rebecca was awarded her Master of Arts in English with a focus on Rhetoric, Composition, and Literacy at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley.

Rebecca R. Reyes was a teacher at Pharr-San Juan-Alamo ISD from February of 2016 through May of 2019. Starting at the 7th grade middle school level, Rebecca taught English at Kennedy Middle School from 2016-2018 where she also coached basketball, volleyball, UIL Poetry, and UIL Modern Oratory. From the Fall of 2018 to Spring of 2019, Rebecca was teaching English at PSJA Memorial Early College High School. She now teaches AP Literature at IDEA Public Schools in Mission, Texas.

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