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Politics and Prison Ink in Arizona

A Map for Navigation in a World of Post-structural Violence

ENRIQUE ALAN OLIVARES-PELAYO

The American Southwest is a land of myths, legends, and folk heroes, complex in terms of the cultural confluence and geographic idiosyncrasies of the region. Even the notion of the “Southwest” is fluid, youthful, still working itself out through processes of politics and policing, from immigration reform to the increasing militarization of the southern border. The American Southwest is culturally indebted to the Mexican Northwest, for everything from the names of its streets and the food eaten to the illegal narcotics consumed by Anglos who now lay claim to the land. The Southwest is an unsteady amalgamation of Mestizo, Anglo, and Native cultures, still in flux, still learning how to coexist without bloodshed. It is a concept as well as a place, struggling with contradiction, with history, and with its own imagination. And no place is more quintessentially “southwestern” than Arizona.

Arizona, its desert drenched in startling fluorescent purple and orange sunsets, is a place of extreme contrasts. It is home to both one of the largest and fastest-developing metropolises in the United States, the urban sprawl of the greater Phoenix area, and thousands of square miles of unpopulated, unique ecosystems where the myth of a barren desert wasteland is laid to rest in blooms of vibrant, colorful flora. It is a land where the cherished figures of the cowboy, the vigilante, and the outlaw have transcended their geographical constraints to inhabit the global imagination, immediately recognizable thanks to Sergio Leone and Clint Eastwood by way of Hollywood. There can be no mistaking that it is also a place of violence, in the imagination and in its bloody and war-torn history. A modern history of Arizona—downright recent when compared to the likes of the Revolutionary War or Civil War, or even with World War I—was fully built upon, planned out, and paved only after Pearl Harbor.

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There are bricks in the walls of bars in Boston hundreds of years older than the great state of Arizona, although the administrative presence of the Spanish, along with their garrisons and jails, dates to the late 17th century.

An indelible part of Arizona's historical tradition is the prison. From the notorious Yuma Territorial Prison, constructed in 1876, to the modern-day correctional bloat that boasts the fifth highest rate of incarceration in the country, Arizona has always been a place that believes in hard time. Today, Arizona spends one billion dollars per annum on maintaining its prison system.¹ That is nearly 10 percent of the state's entire budget. The demographics of Arizona's incarcerated population will not shock anyone familiar with policies like SB 1070: a disproportionately high number of Black and Native people given their small numbers in the state, poor White people, and Mexicans. Lots and lots of Mexicans.

On many of these Mexicans will be found rich tapestries of tattoos that tell a tale of cultural heritage and ethnic pride. In prison, tattooing is a way of coping with incarceration by reclaiming the one material possession that the State of Arizona does not have absolute control over: the prisoner's very body. While in custody, every aspect of life boils down to a form of violence, whether it is administered from the top-down authority of the state or from the bottom-up control of racialized prison gangs.² Tattoos become more than a mere representation of who a person is or claims to be; tats become a map to navigate the (im)material world of prison violence. The material aspect of this invisible but ever-present violence is manifested in the application of tattoos, which become an iconographic language unto themselves that prisoners must learn to read quickly, lest they unknowingly find themselves up against extreme danger.

Tattoo artists in prison command a large degree of respect, in part because the products of their trade are so widely sought. Artists primarily tattoo members of their own race, although they are free to tattoo members of other races if that race is not considered an enemy by an artist's race. Every race has distinct iconography, some of which is proprietary gang symbolism, while the rest is more along the lines of racial motifs. Whites favor Norse mythology and runic symbols; Natives apply eagle feathers and war shields. Mexicans too—*sureños* and *norteños* alike—have a complicated catalog of prison tattoos.

To make these tattoos, prisoners manufacture black prison ink in a process that features scraping and collecting the dark, charcoal-like soot from burning shampoo before mixing it with baby lotion and water.

Ingenious tattooists use this prison-made ink to engrave portraits of Aztec princesses into flesh; immortalize the names of mothers, wives, and girlfriends; and depict fearsome imagery, from skulls and machine guns to prison towers and barbed-wire fences, which denote that the *vato* wearing the tattoo is nobody to mess with. In this rich milieu of Chicano prison body art, accessible to any Mexican or Chicano who wishes to apply it (as opposed to gang-controlled iconography such as Aztec Eagle and Jaguar Knights, or Aztec calendars), one image is the most recognizable: *El Bandolero*, the Mexican outlaw.

The stock figure of the outlaw was a fixture in the oral popular culture of the 19th century, featured in *corridos*, or Mexican folk songs, and legends that celebrated the exploits of men who lived outside the law. However, since the advent of photography, the iconic image of the Mexican outlaw has gained a mythological status. Sombrero, bandolero, pistol, mustache; the picture forms as a reflex, part of a cultural lineage that transcends borders and time. In the Arizona prison system, this figure provides a crucial link that connects currently incarcerated Mexicans and Chicanos to a rich history of warfare, banditry, romantic heroism, and violence. It is a cross-cultural icon, accepted by both *Paisas* (compatriots) and Chicanos, two disparate groups that share a common heritage, but view themselves as distinct racial formations within the complex “racial” dynamics of the prison system in Arizona. Part folklore hero, part symbol of resistance, part menacing threat, the figure of the archetypal Mexican bandit is at once inherited and co-created as an act of agency within a structure that strives for total control. The bandolero comes imbued with the power of a totem, a symbol of proud ethnic heritage and identity, as well as an overt act of resistance against prison authorities who treat prison tattooing as a contraband activity and policy infraction. The adoption of this icon as a symbol of racial pride and unity for Chicanos and *Paisas* is a complicated phenomenon that presupposes the ability of incarcerated people to act as individuals, even within a system that codifies, cordons, and commands their behavior and limits their choices until choice appears almost nonexistent. The image stands outside of time, at once harkening back to the sepia-tinted past, while contemporaneously representing the present-day reality of Arizona’s Mexican and Chicano prisoners as they fight to carve out niches of influence and power within the prison system. Generations of convicted felons have invoked the ethos of the bandolero and, by branding themselves with this heritage image, they at once anchor themselves in

a history of anti-government violence and reincarnate its power a hundred years later. Incarcerated brown men, facing the most humiliating process legally permissible in the United States, find courage, dignity, and a sense of power in the prison tattoos that they apply to their bodies. I should know. I have a few of my own.

It's strange, the way that we collectively perceive prison, or at least the way I did before I was taken into a world of cells and watchtowers. I thought of prison as a monolithic place, an impenetrable and inescapable fortress filled with bad men and monsters. In reality, prison was anything but a geographically isolated black hole from which nothing got in or out. Prison is a fully mobilized experience, a ride, a way of moving through time even when I was not moving through space.

Prison in Arizona is not a penal stronghold. "Prison" is a loose constellation of prison complexes scattered throughout the state, which house multiple yards of varying levels of security. Some are federal and dedicated to the warehousing of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement detainees, while other federal prisons incarcerate men, American citizens or otherwise, convicted of breaking federal laws. The state prisons run by the Arizona Department of Corrections, Rehabilitation and Reentry (ADCRR) contain people who have been convicted of breaking state laws. Finally, there are private facilities that contract with either the federal government or the State of Arizona and will have a prisoner population that reflects the nature of their business arrangement. Stitching all these complexes together is an endless cycle of bus rides, prison transfers, and trips by van in and out of the prison complex gates. Every vehicle was a miniature prison on wheels. We would be handcuffed, trussed with belly and ankle chains, and shipped throughout the state like so much freight. I went to places I had never heard of before, small towns and minor cities where the major industry is the warehousing and punishment of men remanded to the custody of the ADCRR.

I served four years in state prison, from the age of 20 until I was 24. Prior to getting shipped off to prison, I lived in Coconino County Jail for ten months. The unanimous advice I received from the men locked up there was to make a choice as to what "race" I would "run with." While most inmates do not have a range of options when it comes to declaring their race, my bilingual Mexican heritage gave me the option of choosing to run *Paisa* (the terminology for Mexican nationals incarcerated in Arizona) or Chicano, which I came to understand as an ethnic Mexican with an American worldview and upbringing. Up to that point the distinction was lost on me, and I recall spending hours

ruminating on which side I should choose. Even inside the peaceful confines of Coconino Jail, the rumors of ruthless racial enmity between Spanish-speaking *Paisas* and Anglophone Chicanos reached my anxious ears, and I sensed that this decision, the choice of identifying myself as a certain race, would determine the course of my time in prison.

These formative experiences behind bars have shaped much of the work that I now do as a scholar, informing my sense of identity, leaving an indelible mark on my soul. The traumas I endured inside the cages and cells of the Arizona prison system have left me branded internally, psychically, as assuredly as the tattoos that I had etched into my skin have branded me externally. Even though today I am a homeowner, an advanced graduate student at the University of Arizona, a published scholar, and a community organizer seeking to mitigate the impact of the criminal punishment system, there is a part of me that will always respond to the name Inmate #-----. My sense of place in the world is irrevocably tied to Arizona, to the Southwest, and to my heritage as an American-born Mexican. I have the letters “AZ” tattooed on my chest inside a stylized clock overlaid on top of a sun. I am from this place, this idea, of the Southwest. I am from Arizona. In prison, that meant that I chose to run *Raza*.

Raza is vernacular for people who identify as Chicano, and in prison parlance it reifies race and distinguishes *Paisas* from Mexican Americans. Other inmates identified me as a Chicano, although at that time I had not made any internal decisions as to my own racial affiliations. My choice was influenced by my experience with a Chicano inmate named Joker. Until I met him, I spent almost all my time with Spanish-speaking *Paisas* who were serving time for various immigration and customs violations prior to deportation. That changed once I was introduced to Joker.

He was a Sur 13 gang member, and one of the only inmates I encountered in jail who proudly proclaimed themselves a “gangster.” This act of agency and self-determination as an outlaw Chicano gang member gave Joker an irrefutable aura of authority in our mixed-race housing unit. He had *Bandolero* and *Bandolera* tattoos snaking up his arms, as well as a large piece on his back that combined Aztec, Spanish, and Chicano imagery into a tapestry of his heritage. Later, after we had gotten to know one another, I asked him about the females heavily represented on his body. “Even when I’m locked up, I got my girls with me,” he responded. Joker saw himself, and the tattoos that served as an extension of his identity, as “brown to the bone.” On the day that he

entered the unit where I was housed, his first question, loudly proclaimed to the assembled inmates who were variously playing cards, watching TV, or working out together, was, “Are there any *Raza* in here?”

He made it clear that where I was going (literally, as in the state penitentiary, as well as metaphorically, regarding the mental transformation I would need to make to survive my incarceration), lighthearted and unguarded interactions with members of other races would be considered with scrutiny by the inmates who “had the keys to the yard” for my race. What this meant was that no matter which race I eventually chose to run with, I would owe it not only loyalty, but obedience, and part of that obedience was interacting mainly with members of my own race. Joker made it clear that while I was free to run *Paisa* if I wanted to, the much savvier option was to choose to run *Raza*. In the brutally hierarchical, racially segregated, and violent world of Arizona penitentiaries, *Paisas* were subjugated to *Raza* control, and if I chose *Paisa*, I would essentially be choosing a side that was powerless, perceived as largely nonviolent, and much more easily “disrespected.”

POST-STRUCTURAL VIOLENCE

My time in prison was my first experience with what scholars have termed a “landscape of violence,” building on the work of Johan Galtung’s concept of “structural violence.”³ Structural violence, in this application, is a term that refers to a society’s adoption of heavy policing, patrolling, jailing, and surveillance. It is a way of referring to the trauma that we authorize the government to inflict in the name of security. The Arizona-Sonora border is situated as a site of “post-structural violence.”⁴ That does not mean that the violence in the region is over. Instead, this concept refers to the way that an individual reacts to the structural violence inflicted upon them. Do they remain a nail or become a hammer? Slack and Whiteford’s research is based primarily on 72 qualitative interviews with migrants detained and deported to Nogales, Sonora. Their conclusion highlights the elusiveness and shadowy nature of border violence that is a dark reflection of the economic and political violence of the U.S. and Mexico. The shifting dangers of the border crossing are a traumatic and violent experience for everyone involved, regardless of their purpose, nation of origin, or designation as migrant, criminal, law enforcement, or mere bystander. This understanding of the complexities

and irregularities of violence at the border contextualizes the way that prison life in Arizona necessitates forms of violence regardless of who enters the space.

In fact, to even attempt a gesture of resistance to structural violence is an act of harm perpetrated on the person who refuses to participate. Arizona's prisons are both a terminus and a conduit for the post-structural violence of the Arizona-Sonora border, carried inside the bodies of the numbered men who comprise the population, and reflected on their skin in battle scars and prison ink.

That is not to say that prison in Arizona is uniquely violent. All prisons are violent. Prison itself, as it is understood in the United States, is a totalitarian regime of violent control authorized to inflict lethal force on incarcerated people in the name of punishment. Prison is designed to extract from human bodies the one infinitely precious resource possessed by every human being: their time on this earth. And yet, violence in Arizona's prisons takes on specific forms that are unique to the state, and these forms are explicitly racial and racializing. This violence is most clearly represented in the hierarchical racial organizations that dominate and control inmate power structures within the prison system. These organizations, whether referred to by their official designation as "security threat groups," their more common title of "prison gang," or their various nicknames and monikers, can all be summed up by one word: *politics*.

PRISON "POLITICS"

The term in prison vernacular for the complicated racial rule book that governs daily life behind bars is simply "politics." When describing a prison yard, it is not uncommon to hear the adjective "political" used to convey the level of racial segregation and hostility, as in "that yard is very political." Synonymous with "politics" and "political" is the implied presence of prison gangs because racial identity politics are inseparable from inmate power structures in the form of different racial prison gangs. When a yard is "very political," it can be accurately inferred that there is a large gang presence on that yard, and that the reification of race is strictly enforced by various inmate control groups. Every "race" has their own control groups, and these gangs, with names such as the "Aryan Brotherhood" for the "Woods," the "Mexican Mafia" for "*Raza*," the "Border Brothers" for the "*Paisas*," and "Warrior Society" for the

“Chiefs,” all connote racial affiliations. The Blacks, or “Kinfolk,” adhered to their various street affiliations, functioning as individuals or small groups, and did not possess the system-wide racial cohesion or security threat group status held by other races.

Violent reification of race was further exacerbated by the language used by inmates to describe other races. The language itself becomes a form of violence. Nicknames were the primary means of referring to other races. Some nicknames were simply acceptable alternatives, such as the ones previously described (Woods, *Raza*, *Paisas*, Chiefs, Kinfolk), and there were other terms that could be used politely or overheard by other races without causing offense or disrespect, such as “Brothers” for the Blacks, “Homies” or “Eses” for the Chicanos, “Natives” for the Native Americans, and “Peckerwoods” for the Whites.

In addition to these non-offensive vernacular examples of structural violence, derogatory language was frequently used. When speaking with members of one’s own race, it was common to use more racially charged and dangerous language. This type of verbal violence had to be carefully managed so that it would not inadvertently translate into physical violence, causing a racially motivated altercation. Names like “Nigger,” “Wetback,” “Cracker,” “Squaw,” “Toad,” “*Mayate*,” and “Beaner” were all commonly spoken. It was the fraught and contextually nuanced usage of these words that I was desperate to understand, since so much of my day depended on successfully articulating subtle degrees of racial hostility and allegiance in my interactions with the members of my race.

Prison life was universally fragmented and tribalized along racial lines, but this general truth became more important the higher the level of securitization on the yard. In the Arizona Department of Corrections, this stratification is divided into a system as follows: minimum custody, called “2-yards”; medium custody, called “3-yards”; close custody, called “4-yards”; and maximum custody, called “5-yards.” This continuum of securitization and control is closely correlated to the amount of racial segregation and reification of race on the yard, such that lower custody “2’s” and “3’s” permit higher amounts of racial interchange during activities like card games and other forms of gambling, exercise games like basketball or handball, and use of common areas such as the bathrooms.

On minimum yards, racial lines were observed and monitored by inmates, but there was a general lack of enforcement for inmates who violated the cultural norms and mores of prison society. On lower-custody units, for example, it was not uncommon to see two White inmates

playing a game of handball against a team composed of two Black inmates. Similarly, interracial tensions between the distinct races of *Paisa* and *Raza* were minimal on low-custody yards, and members of these two races were “allowed” to house together, share the same tables in the dining area, and cook together from their commissary supplies. These standards of permissible interracial relations fluctuated from yard to yard, and from complex to complex, but generally adhered to norms externally and surreptitiously imposed by the “Big Homies,” or racial “shot-callers,” housed in 5-yards prisons a world away from the 2-yards at the base of the security pyramid.

While the consequences for breaking racial taboos on a minimum yard might end with a mere talking-to from the “heads” of a given race, they never escalated beyond the point of a “hot one,” or a minor physical assault on an inmate by two or three members of his race for breaking the inmate code of ethics and behavior. These assaults functioned as the accepted consequences for misdeeds and allow an inmate who has broken his race’s rules to save face and remain a member in good standing. Administered intra-racially, and timed at exactly sixty seconds or two minutes, depending on the level of misbehavior being corrected, these assaults are designed to escape the notice of the guards, and thus enforce segregation without causing consequences for the larger inmate population on the yard.

On higher-custody yards, however, the consequences began with these beatdowns and escalated to cuttings, stabbings, and in many cases gross bodily harm. The most counterintuitive aspect of these interactions, from a free society perspective, was that these violent interactions were not conflicts between members of different races, but violence imposed on members of a given race by their own, intended to perpetuate the racial segregation and unity of their race. I avoided these consequences through a process of complete submersion into the racial identity that was being offered to me by the Chicano prison culture as promulgated by the “Big Homies,” the term used to refer to validated members of the New Mexican Mafia, Arizona’s homegrown answer to the notorious California prison gang of the same name. These heavily regimented and codified rules and regulations of behavior were designed to project an aura of strength and intimidation to other inmates, to make the Chicano race a force to be reckoned with and respected.

This sense of racial superiority and preeminence in power was reflected in every race. The structures of the race that I had pledged fidelity

to, the Chicanos, were mirrored by the gangs of other races on higher-custody yards. Every race had customs, norms, and codes of behavior that were designed to strengthen group cohesion and maximize the group's power to control various aspects of prison life, such as extortion rackets, drug sales, gambling tables, and inmate black market "stores." Even the term "gang" is misleading, since on close-security and maximum-security yards "gang" can essentially be used synonymously and interchangeably with race to describe factions of inmates willing to commit violence against perceived enemies and inflict it on their own people if racial, or "gang," norms are broken. On minimum yards, an inmate's race simply tends to be the inmate's main source of camaraderie and social interaction, while on high-custody yards the members of the race are expected to act as soldiers to their racial control group's leaders, the "shot-callers," even if they profess no gang affiliation. It is enough to simply be *Raza*, and if a Big Homie needs something, it must be done, simply because of one's race.

This phenomenon is enacted in its purest form inside the solitary confinement cells of maximum security. Here, there was no longer anyone to enforce the racial norms of behavior, and yet I continued to abide by them. By the time that I arrived at the 5-yards that enforced 23-hour lockdown periods inside my cell, and only permitted me to leave my cell in handcuffs twice a week to rec alone, I no longer required the supervision of other inmates to self-police and self-segregate my interactions with the members of my own race. I had come to see the reification of race as necessary to my own survival. I had fully integrated the code of conduct for the *Raza* as a part of my identity to survive the violence commensurate with the stratification of securitization. I had internalized the post-structural violence of the Arizona prison system into every aspect of my life, from racial aggression to other prisoners, to overt hostility to correctional officers and other representatives of prison administration.

This was evident in the tattoos that represented my racial pride. These tattoos were nothing less than symbols of post-structural violence, a material reflection of an immaterial world of gang authority and racial hostility under the supervision of a violent state system that sought to control our every movement. Our bandoleros, lowriders, clowns, cholas, and prison bars allowed us to feel empowered by the choices that we were making to survive the brutal violence of the system. Each race in prison adopted iconography to act as the symbols of their racial unity and strength. It was impossible for me to feel victimized by the system

when I was making choices to defy and subvert its authority. My body became a moving, wordless display of resistance. I had been taught that proudly advertising my ink was a way to show off successfully navigating a world dominated by violence. The application of ink that represented my adoption of a rich mythos of “Brown Pride” was an act of agency, part of a legacy inherited from generations that had done time before me. The ink remains, years after I have let go and moved on.

MOVING ON

My broader autoethnographic research into the effects of post-structural violence has much wider implications for our communities when we recognize that 95 percent of people currently incarcerated will eventually return home, bringing with them the highly racialized and tribalized mentality that ensured their survival within prison.⁵ Adherence to the “politics,” including the ink worn with pride within prison, can serve to alienate and stigmatize a person upon their return to free society. The tattoos on our bodies are part of the long-lasting effect of post-structural violence on the formerly incarcerated and act as one of the most visible effects since they are literally carried and exhibited on our skin: the one possession we acquire in prison and the one possession we bring back out. The other impacts of post-structural violence are more amorphous, but just as devastating. Chronic houselessness, unemployment, poverty, recidivism; the litany of the harmful aftermath of incarceration can make it seem like an intractable problem.

Aspirational goals of equity and inclusion strengthen everything from the theoretical frameworks that we use to try to understand ourselves and our communities, to the legislative initiatives that we implement. However, lip service about equity, social justice, and prison reform will never suffice to change a system that is a function of and by-product of structural racism and genocide. Post-structural violence is not an accidental by-product of our current carceral system, it *is* the product. The purpose is punishment. The time has come when we must ask: How are we working to destigmatize the long-lasting post-carceral impacts of a felony conviction so that people who have been incarcerated can live with dignity in our community? Incarceration is a journey, and tattoos are the map. However, the map only leads in one direction, further into the world of post-structural violence facilitated by our punishment system.

It is time we draw a new map, one that can bring people home. ✦

NOTES

1. <https://corrections.az.gov/article/historic-budget-focuses-public-safety-arizona>.

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