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## Jonathan Hayden and Arvilla Payne-Jackson

### Excerpts from “Graffiti as a Sense of Place” Lorton Prison, Virginia

Editors' Note: This photo essay, created by an undergraduate student at Howard University enrolled in a service learning class taught by Arvilla Payne-Johnson, preserves and documents the graffiti at the now closed Washington D.C. area Lorton Prison. The essay highlights a genre of hidden literacies claimed by inmates even in spaces of vast power differentials and exaggerated social control. We suggest that readers inspired by this project to pursue similar work also consult Jeff Ferrell's *Crimes of Style: Urban Graffiti and the Politics of Criminality* (NY: Garland, 1993), Ralph Cintron's *Angels' Town: Chero Ways, Gang Life, and the Rhetorics of Everyday*, and Pete Vandenberg et al.'s "Confronting Clashing Discourses: Writing the Space between Classroom and Community" in *Reflections* 2.2 (Spring 2002): 19-39.

*When there is no one to listen, the only outlet a prisoner has is the walls.*

In the spring of 2002, the District of Columbia Department of Corrections was in the final stages of preparation to return Lorton Prison (located 25 miles south in Virginia) to the federal government. All inmates had been moved to other institutions. Dr. Payne-Jackson's linguistics class initiated a service-learning project to record the graffiti before the prison was demolished. This project allowed the students access to Lorton for two purposes: first, to record as much of the graffiti as possible in the medium and maximum security sections of the prison before the prison was closed permanently; and second, to compile a photographic journal of the graffiti and grounds for historic preservation.

The students made several trips to the prison with Payne-Jackson. The guides at the prison included both correctional officers and former inmates. Sidney Davis, a former ex-offender and CEO of Solutions VII, Inc. a grassroots, non-profit, faith-based organization started by ex-offenders, took students on a tour of the facilities and writings.

#### **Insights into prison thought**

According to Sidney Davis,

Graffiti is a momentary window into the writer's mind..that explains what that person was feeling at that one exact moment in time. Graffiti is a way for an inmate to externalize his thoughts, especially

in an environment that gives the aura of gloom and hopelessness... Inmates, like slaves, have no real way of expressing themselves, especially openly. Therefore, graffiti, like the slave writings on the wall, is a form of self expression when there is no given voice."

Davis also noted,

Graffiti has a spirit; it represents the spirit of an individual, man or woman, who has been caged like an animal, without nurture or direction. If the spirit is killed, the inmate will break, because he has no other alternative for expressing his voice; no one can hear the pain. There is no more growth, only stagnation, and the opportunity for reform no longer exists.

Big Tim, a 26 year old, former inmate artist and guide for the group, also found graffiti as a way of expressing his feelings in an environment where thoughts and opinions were not valued. Big Tim explained that graffiti helped him to focus his mind, because "graffiti was the expulsion of the negative thoughts-my demons-from my mind, body, and soul." He drew everything from nude women, to demons and monsters. According to Big Tim, the images represented his wants, desires, needs, and answers; answers to what were most important to him, to his future. He revealed that it was his dream one day to sell his graffiti as tattoo art. Everything he drew on his cell wall was also displayed on his body. He saw his art as a way to make a living, so, graffiti for Big Tim was a scheme for future success.

Big Tim noted,

If anything, graffiti was a way to pass the time away. What else did we have to do? Those who were not interested, or who could not read books, and those who disliked physical activity needed something constructive to do. They had to have some way to focus their energy, because if not, they would snap. Graffiti, like physical activity, was a way to divert negative emotions externally, instead of internally.

We saw many images that reflect the rage that boils inside of people as a result of the isolation and inhumane conditions in which they find themselves, when all hope seems to be lost and the only outlet to express the anger and hatred eating them up inside is to put it on the walls of their cells. We note such a view in these lines:

They treat me  
Like an animal.  
They lock me in a cage.  
All I have  
In this world  
Is . . . cold blooded  
Violence  
And  
Rage!!

### Existential Prison Graffiti

Existential graffiti is the transference of thought to a physical form. In Lorton we found prison existential art to include religious (spiritual and confessional expressions), political statements, and fantasy-based art (including sexual). Religious graffiti could be as simple as a religious sign. Inmates often turned to reading as a way to change their existence. Often times, those inmates would read the Bible, the Q'uran, or other books for spiritual growth. These themes were then expressed in their art—whether drawn or put into poetic form. For example, one wall depicted these two lines:

In the beginning it was nothing here except God  
An when everything is gone nothing will be here except God.

The art can take on a thought provoking form of religious or spiritual significance that reflects positive change and recent teachings or reaches back to earlier values. Religious symbols were also commonly featured in the graffiti, either as symbols standing on their own or in combination with other symbols and graffiti.

The symbols could reflect ethnic traditions such as the African Andinka or the Islamic Crescent. In the oppressive conditions of prison, artists find reason, strength, solace through heritage or religion.



African Andika, Crescent, and RIP

Confessional art expresses the inmate's pain and suffering, and in some cases his beginning steps to rehabilitation. It often reflects an inmate's recognition as to why he is in prison. For example, one piece of confessional graffiti recorded on the walls of the prison was the saying:

Dear Lord help me change my ways.  
Show a little mercy on judgment day.

The mural in the next photo depicts a crying man, who looks like Jesus (and represents the inmate). According to gang lore, tears indicate the victims a person has hurt or killed. In this case, the tears are on the left side, which shows that he has killed three people. Tears on the right side indicate the number of people he has shot, stabbed, or brutalized.



Mural of Christ-like Figure Crying Behind Bars

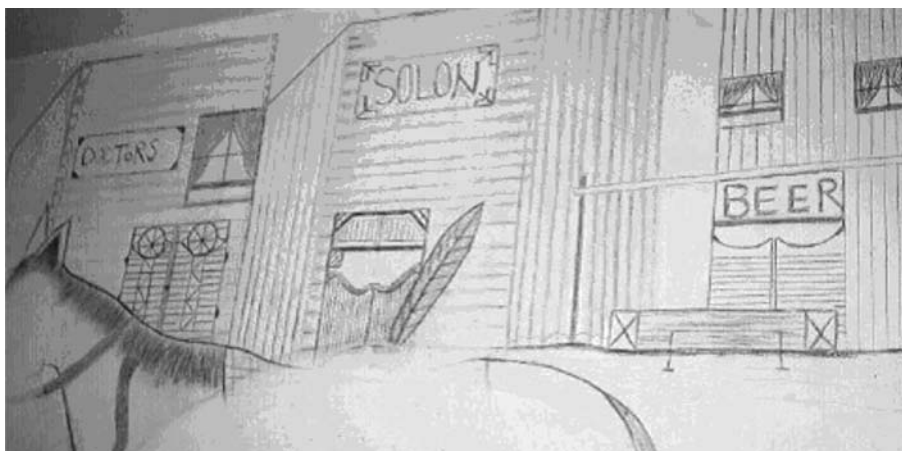


"Monkeys on the Back"

Fantasy graffiti takes several forms. Perhaps the most prevalent has sexual themes. Several pictures we recorded depicted nude women. Other forms of fantasy graffiti include pictures of demons, magicians, or skulls. These represent the negative aspects of an inmate's experience, the "monkeys on the back."

The graffiti of the window with the marijuana, cocaine, and liquor bottle ("Monkeys on the Back") represents stages of drug entrapment with Satan orchestrating the drama. The spider weaving the web represents the deadly trap that drug habits hold for the victim caught in the web and the certain death that comes from the poisonous bite of a deadly spider.

Another type of fantasy-based graffiti is seen in the mural of an old western town:



"Western Town"

Sydney Davis explained that graffiti often reflects the culture of a prisoner's environment. The western venue could reflect a prisoner's fantasizing about the old west from readings or could reflect parallels of experience. For example, the feather represents American Indians who were segregated and ostracized from the social institutions of society. The evil influence of liquor brought destruction to American Indians and their society. It could also reflect the influence of westerns on the formation of the Jamaican drug gangs or posses.

### Concluding Thoughts

Service learning projects such as this one allow students to become aware of the human side of the people we study about in books, but that we rarely have a chance to meet face-to-face. It gives better insight into how we need to "think outside the box and the books," to come up with new and creative solutions to the problems that plague our communities and our nation. Too often we are bound by our academic and cultural convictions and are unwilling to see outside

of the brainwashed institutional parameters of how marginalized populations are supposed to be treated because they have made mistakes, not taken advantage of opportunities, or just been victims of circumstances.

Students are thus able to give a voice to people who have no voice. Our experience working with Sydney Davis and other former inmates taught us that what we believed could be challenged. Our philosophies are not permanent, because a simple experience can change our lives. As Hayden reflected in a journal at the end of the course:

I have suffered through many tragedies in my life, the most recent, the murder of my uncle. That event assisted in shaping my opinion of those who are convicted of crimes. I believed that inmates are no longer people, and do not deserve a second chance in life. I wanted them to suffer the same way I suffered. My trip to Lorton opened my eyes; no longer did I see 'savage' men who were the scum of society, but I saw men who deserve a second chance to make it in this society. For the first time, I saw men who are not that different from me. In another time and place these men could have been my peers, or my victims. That realization made me recognize that no one should be left behind or tossed aside. Society as a whole may not care, but that does not mean that I should not care. I cannot turn my back on people regardless of what they may or may not have done, so I vowed to make a difference, not just through words but also by action.

To this end, several students who participated in the Lorton experience are working on putting together an exhibit that we hope to show at several local agencies, such as Washington, DC's Martin Luther King, Jr. Library. We hope to be able to tell the story of graffiti as a sense of place for inmates—a place where they can express their inner souls while at the same time claiming their identity.

### Note

All photographs in this essay were taken by Dr. Arvilla Payne-Jackson.

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