UNIVERSITY OF OKLAHOMA

GRADUATE COLLEGE

AESTHETIC MECHANISMS OF DEHUMANIZATION IN THE PRISION INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX

A DISSERTATION

SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE FACULTY

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

Degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

By

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Norman, Oklahoma
2024

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AESTHETIC MECHANISMS OF DEHUMANIZATION IN THE PRISION INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX

A DISSERTATION APPROVED FOR

THE SHYAM DEV PATWARDHAN DEPARTMENT OF PHILOSOPHY

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Acknowledgements

I am profoundly grateful to the following people for their support as I worked to complete this dissertation. My time as a doctoral student involved many great challenges, from navigating the COVID-19 pandemic to becoming a mother to twins, and it's unimaginable to me that I could have completed this work without such a robust network of support.

My advisor, Sherri Irvin, has been an extraordinary source of inspiration, solidarity and guidance for me in this work. Sherri, thank you so very much for your adaptability and unwavering commitment to seeing this project through to completion during a time of so much change (in my personal life and the world at large).

The members of my committee, Brian Burkhart, Steve Ellis, and Trina Hope, provided great questions and suggestions through various stages of the project. Thank you for your enthusiasm for the project and for bringing your own stories and expertise into this work.

From the very beginning of my studies at the University of Oklahoma I have had the privilege of participating in an aesthetics research group which has been crucial for my development as a scholar and professional philosopher. I am extremely grateful to those group members, Cheryl Frazier, Jeremy Fried, Sherri Irvin, Zach Jurgensen, and Babak Mohammadizadeh Khoshroo, whose thoughtful feedback and encouragement have enriched my work. Thank you for your willingness to read through so many drafts of each chapter, I do not know how I would have done this without you all.

Thank you also to all of my friends at the University of Oklahoma for your comradery and contributions to my growth as a scholar. A special thanks to Violet Victoria for our many virtual writing sessions.

Many other philosophers have been helpful throughout my time in graduate school, but I would especially like to extend my thanks to the faculty of the Philosophy Department at the University of North Carolina, Charlotte, where I studied philosophy as an undergraduate and earned my master's degree. Thank you especially to Michael Kelly, Andrea Pitts, and Lisa Rasmussen for shaping me into the philosopher I am today and for continuing to support my work beyond my career at UNCC. You all were my introduction to philosophy and your commitment to student success, especially first-year students such as myself, has been instrumental to my development as an academic.

The successful conclusion of this project would not have been possible without my incredible family and friends. My dear friends Angel Jose Vega and Orlando Romero Jr. have been not only tremendous sources of encouragement, their stories and lived experiences were the genesis of this very dissertation. I hope that I have done justice to your stories, thank you for changing my life with your generosity, bravery and brilliance.

To my longtime friends John-Anthony Thevos and Angelica Kathryn Thevos, thank you for not only hosting me in your home when I needed space to focus on my writing, but also for offering so much valuable advice and encouragement through this process. To my many fabulous friends who offered to talk through the project at various stages, read through drafts, and encouraged me not to give up as I faced a variety of challenges, thank you so very much for being here for me through every stage of this.

I owe a tremendous thank you to my family who has supported me in more ways than I can list here. I am immensely grateful for my parents, Heidi and Mike, as well as my in-laws, Angie and Ken, for teaming up to provide childcare so that I could keep writing this dissertation. To my partner, Dustin Green, you have been with me for every step of this endeavor, from

applying to PhD programs to my successful defense. Dustin, thank you so much for being willing to do whatever it took to make sure I had my writing time and was able to see this to completion. From moving to Oklahoma for my doctoral program to moving back home to North Carolina with infant twins, your commitment to my success has been remarkable. Thank you so very much to everyone who contributed to this work.

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Abstract

My dissertation argues that the aesthetic conditions of incarceration seriously impact the experiences and treatment of incarcerated people in the United States. In Chapter I, I argue that humans have aesthetic needs which are integral to our wellbeing. Aesthetic needs include the need to enact aesthetic agency as well as the need to have aesthetically fulfilling experiences. When aesthetic agency is severely constrained, as it is in many carceral contexts, aesthetic harm may occur. Chapter II discusses the relationship between aesthetic harm and dehumanization. Aesthetic harm can be understood both as a form of and a sign of dehumanization. As a form, aesthetic harm can be understood as a method of dehumanization which utilizes aesthetics. As a sign, aesthetic harm refers to the phenomenon where prior exposure to dehumanization reinforces future subjection to aesthetic harm. Thus, there is a feedback loop occurring with aesthetic harm: prior exposure to aesthetic harms as a form of dehumanization increases the likelihood of continued exposure to mistreatment, both aesthetic harm and other types of harm. Chapter III explores examples within two categories of aesthetic harms: those associated with the conditions of the environment incarcerated people are subjected to, and those which come from the objects they encounter in the prison. Designing goods and spaces with the goal of better managing and controlling a population and saving costs is often at odds with building a space which provides support for the needs of the incarcerated, something which is essential for rehabilitation. Chapter IV examines acts of aesthetic resistance. Aesthetic resistance involves attempting to regain or retain agency related to one's everyday aesthetic experiences and creative expression. These acts work to resist dehumanization by countering the aesthetic harm which creates and exacerbates dehumanization in the carceral context.

Introduction

I am a first-generation student, meaning neither of my parents have attended or graduated from college. Growing up, college was not on my radar as a part of my future whatsoever. I attended a severely underfunded public high school where most kids did not discuss the future, things like applying to college or potential career tracks. Even before we were 18, plenty of my peers had experienced significant hardships: addiction, fatal overdose, unwanted teenage pregnancies, arrests, and other contact with the criminal justice system were not uncommon. There is nothing wrong with choosing not to go to college, of course. But for a variety of reasons, ranging from poor preparatory education to insufficient funds, many of us did not even see college as an option. My own path to higher education occurred by chance and I still do not entirely understand how it happened. A teacher of mine must have recommended me for an early college program, I got a letter in the mail about fully funded tuition and getting to leave high school early, and that was that.

I made it to college, and I was shocked by how casually professors and students alike would assume who was present in the classroom. I had some uncomfortable experiences in class discussions which talked about people who experience addiction or people who experience arrest, like the people I love and have grown up with, as if they were objects of their scholarly fascination and not subjects. When we talk about victims of poverty, addiction, and the criminal justice system as if they are a decidedly separate group of people from the people in the classroom, in academic spaces generally, we reinforce the idea that they are not like us. And we should be concerned with what it means for our studies and theories about them, if indeed they are not here, not present in this conversation about themselves. What can we really know about them, without them?

In my work, I insist on including the people who are afflicted by the harms I study in theorizing about these harms. This project was born out of stories which have been shared with me through my relationships to currently and formerly incarcerated people. It was important to me when I started studying the US prison industrial complex as an undergraduate student to learn from people who have experienced incarceration themselves. I found a list of pen pal organizations that connect currently incarcerated people to people in the free world in the back of a book I was reading and decided to write my first letter. I had known people who had experienced incarceration, but not anyone who was condemned to spend all their life on the inside, or to die by the hands of the state. Unsure what to say in my first letter, I wrote a brief introductory letter to Orlando Romero Jr., a man on death row at San Quentin prison. I naively approached this exchange with the assumption that I was doing something to help someone in need, that I would be providing solace to someone whose life was hopeless. Orlando's response to me turned my assumptions inside out. He returned three typewritten pages to my few sentences of introduction, pages full of humor and stories about himself but most surprisingly to me his letter included so much eagerness to be of service to me and even a message of hope. He tells me that he has a lot of time on his hands, living on death row, and that he would be ecstatic to do anything within his power to lend me an ear, to listen to my struggles, to be a friend and to share his experiences in prison if it could help with my studies. For nearly five years he was a big part of my life, cheering me on through life changes and accomplishments (from the time I got accepted into my PhD program he addressed every letter with Dr.), consoling me through difficult times, getting to know me and my family, and sharing ideas with one another about how we could live in a better world. Orlando is gone now, not because the state was successful in their execution of him (he was going through an appeals process for his case at the time of his

death) but because of the state's negligence in transporting COVID-19 positive prisoners from another institution into San Quentin at a time that they had zero confirmed cases. Orlando was an artist; his paintings and prose gave me much to think about in terms of the role of art in working towards a better world. I have shared his drawings, paintings and words with many, and all who experience them have expressed feeling deeply moved by them. His contribution to my work and life will never leave me. I consider how a large part of our friendship involved collaborating on aesthetic resistance projects in Chapter IV.

The pen pal project that I met Orlando through, Black & Pink, also hosted annual holiday card writing initiatives which I participated in for several years. Many people send holiday cards without a return address, a way of writing without committing to a back-and-forth relationship with someone since we'd often send them out in large batches (30-50 cards per mailer). I decided to randomly include my address on a selection of holiday cards, just in case someone wanted to write back. This is how I met Jose Angel Vega, another beloved friend whose experiences and words have greatly contributed to this project. Except I never wrote a card to Angel, I wrote to his cellmate at the time. His cellmate gave my card to Angel because Angel had not received any cards, he only had his grandmother on the outside who could not always afford to send him mail. I am grateful to Angel's cellie at the time for this act of generosity, as Angel has become a part of my family and has been a light in my life for many years now (almost 9 years at the time of writing this). Angel is one of the most kind and altruistic people I have ever met.[1] It would take the length of this dissertation to share every act of immense selflessness that I have known Angel to perform, but I must include a few examples here. Angel frequently takes care of injured animals that make their way into prison walls, birds with an injured wing or a lizard with a

[1] Cellie is a term used by the incarcerated to refer to their cellmate.

missing foot. When the COVID-19 pandemic hit his prison, he volunteered to take care of sick inmates at a time where there was no PPE or vaccine available to protect himself. When the courts ruled that prisoners were eligible to receive COVID stimulus checks, an amount of money which is extremely difficult and rare to come by for most incarcerated people, Angel insisted on sharing his check with me as I had recently become a mother to twins. These stories about Angel matter because we live in a world that is too quick to dehumanize and demonize those who are incarcerated, especially people serving life sentences or death sentences who we often deem "the worst of the worst."

For those of us who do not know anyone who has been incarcerated, we typically rely on representations of the incarcerated which are too frequently harmful. Shallow representations of criminalized people which center on our fear of them and our disgust for their transgressions flood our news and popular media. Academic sources which theorize about the incarcerated without having a direct relationship or connection to incarceration and incarcerated people are abundant. Orlando and Angel, along with every person I have connected with and learned from over the years who has been subjected to the criminal justice system in the United States, have suffered a great deal of cruelty and injustice in their lives. Their lives leading up until their incarceration were marked with adversity and their life behind bars has brought them even more hardship and trauma. Representations of them and other incarcerated people in the media exclude the nuance and details of the lives of the incarcerated. They flatten incarcerated people into "criminals" who are rarely sympathetic characters, often people who we consider to be inferior to the rest of us. We have a lot to learn from people who have directly experienced incarceration and thankfully there are more scholars, journalists, publishers, artists and producers who are interested in lifting this knowledge out of the shadows. This project is a sliver of that work.

There is a growing body of work on the connection between art and prison: how art can help us better know and understand the experiences of those who are incarcerated, how art can be used to influence policy around incarceration, and how art can be therapeutic for people experiencing incarceration. What is less explored so far is the role of everyday aesthetics in carceral spaces. Incarcerated people are deprived of a great deal of sensory and aesthetic pleasures and satisfaction. The absence of many tastes, smells, touches, sights, and sounds of life on the outside and the inability to choose which clothes you wear, how to adorn your space, how to prepare a meal are a part of incarceration in the US. In addition to experiencing this deprivation, carceral spaces are rife with conditions that produce sensory overload. Buildings are devoid of décor or softness to break up harsh echoes from constant yelling and feature unpleasant smells from poor circulation and 24/7 fluorescent lighting. The aesthetic conditions of incarceration are harmful to those who endure them, and they can also influence how we view the incarcerated, their humanity and dignity, and how they view themselves. Further, many incarcerated people respond to these aesthetically harmful conditions with what I call aesthetic resistance. In short, this project is about the power of the aesthetic in shaping the experiences of incarceration and the way the outside world understands the incarcerated. Beyond engaging in artmaking or appreciation, how do other aesthetic practices occur in carceral spaces? What is their impact? Why should we care?

In Chapter I, I argue that humans have aesthetic needs which are integral to our wellbeing. Aesthetic needs are not always recognized as true needs, but they should be. We can look to our own lived experiences and the experiences of others, as well as the growing literature on everyday aesthetics, to consider the ways in which the aesthetic texture of our lives impacts our wellbeing. Aesthetic needs include our need to enact aesthetic agency and our need to have

aesthetically fulfilling experiences. There is a relationship between our aesthetic agency and our aesthetic experiences: our degree of available aesthetic agency determines what kind of role we can have in seeking out or creating positive aesthetic experiences. Similarly, our aesthetic environments may influence our ability to enact our aesthetic agency. Aesthetic agency and engagement are important parts of human life and the severe restriction of either can contribute to dehumanization.

In Chapter II, I consider the relationship between aesthetic harm and dehumanization, demonstrating the role that aesthetic harm plays in reinforcing and creating dehumanizing attitudes towards oppressed groups. Aesthetic harm can be understood both as a form of and a sign of dehumanization. As a form, aesthetic harm can be understood as a method of dehumanization which utilizes aesthetics. For example, prison uniforms contribute to stripping inmates of their individual identities, which is a component of dehumanization. They remove sartorial autonomy and mark individuals with their Department of Corrections number, rather than their names. Aesthetic harm as a sign of dehumanization refers to the phenomenon where prior exposure to dehumanization reinforces future subjection to aesthetic harm. There is research which suggests that already viewing someone as less-than-human due to prior dehumanization contributes to further inhumane treatment. Thus, there is a feedback loop occurring with aesthetic harm: prior exposure to aesthetic harms as a form of dehumanization increases the likelihood of continued exposure to mistreatment, both aesthetic harm and other types of harm.

In Chapter III, I will analyze several examples of aesthetic harms which affect incarcerated people. I focus on two categories of aesthetic harms: those associated with the conditions of the environment incarcerated people are subjected to, and those which come from

the objects they encounter in the prison. Environmental aesthetic harms include architecture choices which may limit exposure to natural light or maximize isolation. The discussion of aesthetic harms associated with objects will consider not only the quality of the clothes, food, and other goods used by incarcerated people, but also the intent that goes into designing goods which cannot be repurposed and used for alternative functions, such as becoming weaponized. Designing goods and spaces with the goal of better managing and controlling a population (and saving costs, as this is a mass incarceration system which manages millions of people) is often at odds with building a space which provides support for the needs of the incarcerated, something which would be essential for actual rehabilitation.

In Chapter IV, I offer examples of incarcerated people participating in aesthetic resistance. Aesthetic resistance involves pushing back against the constraints on one's aesthetic agency, attempting to regain or retain agency related to one's everyday aesthetic experiences and creative expression. These acts work to resist the dehumanization connected to aesthetic harm in carceral spaces. When the incarcerated are able to engage in aesthetic resistance, they may be able to at least partially hold onto a sense of their own human worth and dignity. When people on the outside, in the so-called free world, can witness these acts of aesthetic resistance, there is also the potential for our dehumanizing attitudes towards the incarcerated to be transformed. Notably, acts of aesthetic resistance are often collaborative. They are frequently constructed or made possible through the cooperation of others and the products of this engagement are often shared with others. This counters the supreme isolation of incarceration and it also counters our representations of the incarcerated which paint them as unable to be successful community members for a variety of reasons.

There is so much that the aesthetic conditions of incarceration, as told by the incarcerated, can help us realize. Maybe if we hear descriptions of the atrocious food, the indignity of prison uniforms, the discomfort of a prison cell, we can better imagine ourselves in these cages. Perhaps that ability to imagine ourselves or our loved ones in these heinous conditions could lead to the moral outrage needed to end the inhumane system of incarceration in the United States. Possibly, we may learn of the aesthetic resistance practices that the incarcerated engage in despite their conditions and we may recognize them for who they really are. They are human beings, no different than any of us who have not been criminalized, and their stories have nuance which deserves to be included alongside the publication of the worst moments of their life. They deserve a dignified life and beyond that important fact, we need to (as often I put it when talking with my students) "get real" about what we think incarceration is doing for the people experiencing it and for our society at large. In the conclusion of this project, I suggest paths for future work, including the need to further examine the impact of aesthetic harm on recidivism and the outcomes of incarceration. For now, an excerpt from Orlando on how the world views people like him, how he views himself and the world, and how hope is connected to the sunrise and to smiley faces included in letters:

> My lawyers tell me that there are too many ready to condemn any effort for people in my situation, to reach out and form meaningful bonds. I've seen that, but mostly its towards the high profile inmates. And like in all groups in society, there are bad eggs in every basket, so the only difference here is trying to see the good in people first, because they live with the world seeing them as deserving of death, worth less than being an afterthought, a throwaway life.....and no matter how long I live in this place, it still breaks my heart. These souls awaiting death, were innocents at one time, cried and

nobody came, were worthy of love, affection, peace, and most of them got slapped or beaten for crying, were starved, not held, lived in fear, and that's just what I recall from my own early life growing up. Not everyone who comes from that, falls, because some rise above and become great, so who's to say how a life will turn out. Which is why choose to keep HOPE for the world, for the people in it, and HOPE for the simple things that will make me smile tomorrow.

Today was a success just by enjoying the sunrise, beyond that, hope is just a dream. And while I consider myself one of the better souls of this place, (meaning I've embraced the light, instead of prison mentality and darkness), sometimes I'm still fearful of my dreams. the past creeps in horrible ways at times.

But, smiles do keep coming, even to me here, right Stephanie? I got a new friend today!!! and she puts little smiley faces on her letters, just like I do!!! :) ha!

My first ever letter from Orlando Romero Jr. November 30th, 2016. Shared with permission.

Chapter I. Aesthetic Needs, Harm and Agency

In this chapter, I will discuss how aesthetic needs are integral to wellbeing. I incorporate concepts from the everyday aesthetics literature to provide context and bolster my arguments that aesthetic needs exist and that the aesthetic is ethically relevant. I will then explore how having our aesthetic needs and wellbeing negatively interfered with can contribute to what I call aesthetic harm. My theorizing about aesthetic needs centers the experiences of those living in dire circumstances such as poverty or incarceration in the United States in particular. This sheds light on the relationship between aesthetic needs and the phenomenon of aesthetic harm, and on the mediation of this relationship by aesthetic agency. I will explore the role of aesthetic agency in our abilities to fulfill our aesthetic needs and to identify and mitigate aesthetic harm.

Aesthetic Needs

I use the term *aesthetic needs* to address the impact of aesthetic endeavors and environments on our wellbeing. Aesthetic needs break down into two categories: the capacity for enacting one's own aesthetic expression and access to satisfying aesthetic experiences. These two categories are not entirely separate: engaging in satisfying aesthetic experiences can inspire one to express themselves creatively. For example, in beautiful cityscapes or parks it is not unusual to see artists sketching or painting, seeking inspiration from their aesthetic environment.

Notably, aesthetic needs will vary from person to person. This variation may come from differences in our tastes, aesthetic preferences, or aesthetic priorities. When do certain aesthetic preferences become needs? This also depends on the individual. In some cases, our aesthetic needs may be greatly influenced by our other needs. For example, I have an aesthetic need for soft or natural lighting (as opposed to bright fluorescents) because I am prone to migraines which can be triggered by fluorescent lights. My medical need which increases my sensitivity to light

has impacted my aesthetic preferences for lighting. Even when the conditions which increase the likelihood of a migraine are not present, I adjust the lighting of my environment based on my aesthetic preferences for softer light. For example, every room in my house has at least one lamp or light fixture with a dimmable switch, I use only warm lightbulbs, and I rely on natural light as much as possible because it has less "pulsing" than artificial light sources, the root of the migraine trigger in fluorescent light.

This need shapes my aesthetic preferences in lighting, resulting in a special interest in experimenting with various light fixtures, lightbulbs, curtains, and blinds to best meet this aesthetic need. In environments which do not allow for adjustments to the lighting, such as classroom spaces with fluorescent lights with no dimmable switch or windows, I experience aesthetic harm because of the violation of my aesthetic need. These environments limit my aesthetic agency to both express my aesthetic preferences for softer lighting and have access to a satisfying to me aesthetic experience. Examining both categories of aesthetic need can help us understand both the impact of aesthetic elements of life on our wellbeing and the roles of aesthetic agency and sociopolitical positioning in mediating our ability to have our aesthetic needs met.

The need for satisfying aesthetic experiences can be met without the experiencer having a particularly active role in the construction of the experience. For example, people living in neighborhoods designed with their aesthetic pleasure in mind can enjoy green spaces or consume public art without much effort. They are beneficiaries of the aesthetic experiences that someone else has constructed for their consumption and enjoyment. In the United States, poorer

neighborhoods tend to have less access to green spaces. Thus, residents of those neighborhoods must make more effort to enjoy the type of aesthetic experience that green spaces afford.[2]

The need to create aesthetically satisfying experiences for oneself is evidenced by the great lengths that some will go to participate in and construct aesthetic experiences. For example, in prisons there are very limited options for food. While incarcerated, people are often unable to enjoy dishes that are connected to their identity in a variety of ways: meals that hold cultural value, traditional significance, nostalgia for childhood, etc. Despite the limitations placed on meal choices in prison, incarcerated people manage to find ways to engage in food practices that are meaningful to them through their own reimaginations of these meals. There are cases of incarcerated folks pitching in with friends and/or cellmates to create a birthday cake for a friend (A. Vega, personal communication, March 3rd, 2021). A birthday cake made in prison rarely (if ever) resembles a "typical" birthday cake in terms of the ingredients that it's composed of, taste, or its adornment with colorful frostings. Still, these cakes, although sometimes made from unconventional materials, may fulfill multiple aesthetic needs. In the process of making the cake, the baker gets to participate in the creation of an aesthetic good. Rather than viewing the lack of conventional ingredients as a shortcoming of the prison cake, I see the creativity and imagination necessary for creating a cake in these constrained circumstances as a way of reclaiming aesthetic agency by creatively expressing oneself through aesthetic means. Examples of reclaimed aesthetic agency in carceral spaces will be the focus of Chapter IV.

But what does it mean to categorize something as a need? One approach to figuring out what constitutes a human need has been to look at human behavior and what motivates it. For

[2] There is an increasing emphasis on research in urban planning which studies the impact of green spaces on people who live near them versus the detriment of not having accessible green spaces in lower income neighborhoods. See White et al., 2019.

example, we know that food is a need not only because of our biological knowledge that tells us so, but also from our observation of human behavior which shows that humans (like most other living organisms) are highly motivated to seek out the means to eat. A well-known approach in psychology to understanding human needs is Abraham Maslow's motivational theory of human needs, commonly referred to as Maslow's hierarchy of needs. In his 1943 paper "A Theory of Human Motivation," Maslow uses a pyramid chart to hierarchize the categories of human needs: physiological needs, safety needs, love and belonging, esteem, and self-actualization. Maslow made many updates to his theory during the decades following the original paper. Among these updates was the addition of three tiers to the pyramid: cognitive needs, aesthetic needs, and, later, transcendence needs.

Maslow originally claimed that lower needs must be satisfied before moving onto satisfying higher needs; however, he later clarified that the pyramid should not be viewed as rigid. One point of clarification is that individuals may move on to higher needs even when lower needs are not completely satisfied. (Maslow, 1987, p. 69) He also states that the order of needs may be flexible, contingent on external circumstances or differences among individuals. (Maslow, 1987, p. 71) For example, one person may be more motivated to pursue creative ventures that satisfy their aesthetic needs while another person is more driven to find fulfillment in research that fuels their cognitive need for knowledge. This seems to me to be intuitive and straightforward. I'm especially interested in examining the impact of external circumstances on an individual's ability and motivation to move through the different tiers of needs.

Maslow's theory, even with its addendums, has been criticized for being based on a very limited sample size of 18 people (mostly men) that were chosen based on Maslow's judgment that they had reached "self-actualization." In other words, he focused on people who he

identified as having most if not all their needs met over the course of their lives, rather than centering his research on those who had lifelong struggles to have their needs met. Even though Maslow later claimed that his theory allows for flexibility in cases where higher needs are met even when lower needs are not met completely, he held on to his stance that individuals cannot reach their potential and self-actualization without the satisfaction of lower needs. Contemporary theorists have used examples of humans living in poverty to challenge this claim, demonstrating that people are capable of satisfying higher order needs even when there are extreme difficulties in satisfying the lower needs. (Tay and Diener, 2011) For example, regions that struggle with chronic food insecurity still have individuals who could be understood as having met their own potential through endeavors related to the higher needs: fulfillment in love and belongingness, creative expression, etc. These circumstances demonstrate that even when an individual may not have the power to meet certain lower needs because of external conditions, they can sometimes find opportunities to meet higher order needs. I believe that focusing on people who live in survival mode with many, many unmet needs can offer crucial insight into how we navigate unmet needs in circumstances where the path to having those needs met is especially difficult.

There are potentially damaging effects of writing off people who cannot meet their lower needs because of external circumstances, such as lack of adequate food and shelter, as being incapable of reaching their potential and self-actualization. Regarding others as perpetually stuck in their path to self-actualization due to conditions that are out of their control could contribute to the dehumanization that occurs in carceral spaces. (I will take up the topic of dehumanization in detail in chapter II.) Unfortunately, there are many people who experience significant barriers to consistent access to food and shelter. Given the large number of people experiencing poverty, it

is important to have a view of self-actualization which does not automatically preclude a significant percentage of the world population from reaching it.[3]

On the one hand, lack of access to lower, basic needs being met can indeed restrict one's potential and possibilities. A simple example is research showing that hungry students are less able to focus on class. (Johnson and Markowitz, 2018) Lack of access to secured lower needs such as food interferes with the students' academic success in a straightforward way. On the other hand, recognizing the hardship that the students' hunger imposes on them should not foreclose the possibility of them "reaching their potential" despite these limitations.

Acknowledging how barriers to meeting basic needs affect people and groups can be an important part of working to remediate those barriers for better access, but it should not, as it does with Maslow's view, foreclose those people from fulfilling their potential and thus reaching self-actualization. For these reasons, I do not see the hierarchal model of needs as particularly useful for addressing how human needs function. While it is true that people living in poverty, for example, could possibly have accessed different potential if they had the resources to pursue different paths (such as being able to afford higher education), consistent access to food and shelter is not required to enact one's potential in other fruitful ways (e.g. creative pursuits, cultivating talents, having meaningful relationships with others). Yet Maslow's theory guided the thinking for some time.

Psychologists now think of motivation as a "pluralistic behavior, whereby needs can operate on many levels simultaneously. A person may be motivated by higher growth needs at

[3] Studies estimate 8-9% of the world's population lives in poverty in recent years. (Lakner et al., 2022) Although the boundaries for determining what it means to be "living in poverty" vary and may be insufficient for getting a real picture of how many people struggle at some point to cover the costs of basic needs, it may still be useful to note that the percentage of people who struggle to meet the "lower" needs as they are framed by Maslow is not insignificant.

the same time as lower deficiency needs." (Wahba and Bridwell, 1976, p. 213) Considering all of this, what purpose does the hierarchy serve beyond reinforcing what is already common sense? Of course, securing food and shelter is of high priority for human beings, but does that mean we are only motivated to pursue satisfaction of higher needs insofar as these "lower" needs have been completely fulfilled? If we recognize that there are people who experience inadequate access to food and shelter while also creating works of art, meaningfully engaging with their community, and so on, what is the hierarchal model contributing?

Ultimately, I am concerned less with critiquing the specifics of Maslow's view of needs than with considering how the long-standing view of needs as hierarchal has been weaponized against marginalized people. A view which takes lower needs to be necessarily satisfied before higher needs can be pursued contributes to the access restrictions that marginalized communities face in needs fulfillment. Put differently, if we do not see higher needs as being possible to reach without the fulfillment of basic needs, we may feel justified in denouncing the inclusion of opportunities to fulfill these higher needs (like being a part of a community or engaging with aesthetics) when we make policies which affect disenfranchised groups. Perhaps a recognition that needs work in tandem, and it is not required to pass level 1 needs in order to pursue level 5 needs, would allow us to include provisions for ensuring access to relationship with others or creative endeavors alongside our provisions for adequate food and shelter for those who lack it.

I am not especially interested in arguing that some needs are more important than others nor that they are all equally important. Rather, I'd like to draw our attention to the ways that human motivation and the drive to fulfill needs play out in those circumstances where individuals are especially constrained by external conditions. We are all subject to the impact of external forces. However, looking at cases where there are extreme limitations to one's ability to

have needs met, as is the case with impoverished communities or incarcerated populations, will support a better understanding of human needs. My view is that while the deleterious effects of unfulfilled basic needs are real and worth examining, inadequate access to basic need fulfillment should not be understood as foreclosing altogether the possibility of higher need fulfillment, such as engaging in creative practices which also contribute to our wellbeing and satisfaction. In Chapter II, I explore the dangers of assuming that disenfranchised groups have no aesthetic agency, even in situations where that agency is severely restricted, as it connects to dehumanization processes. Rather than foreclosing the possibility of higher need fulfillment, the absence of basic needs being met may fuel some people to pour more of themselves into the fulfillment of self-actualization through, among other practices, the engagement with everyday aesthetics that I will discuss later.

This approach can demonstrate the way that needs considered to be of different orders, such as shelter and belongingness, may sometimes be met in tandem rather than one after another. For example, an unhoused person has needs that are not satisfied: they lack shelter and with that, safety. While these conditions may make it more difficult for them to meet any higher order needs such as those for belongingness or self-actualization, this does not preclude satisfying them. In practice, working to meet so-called higher order needs even when basic needs cannot be met may be necessary for the person to survive long enough to ever see their other basic needs become met. For example, unhoused people tend to meet and work together with other unhoused people in their area to negotiate trades for goods needed, share information about places to sleep that night, stick together for safety in numbers, etc. While their interactions may stem from a need to cooperate with one another to have one's own basic needs met, these relationships can in turn provide fulfillment of another "higher order" need, such as the

belonginess need, which involves having relationships with others in your community. In practice, it looks like we can work on the fulfillment of different needs at once, even before more basic needs are fully met. If we see all needs as in play at once, rather than hierarchically arranged, then should we be more concerned about the fact that someone's aesthetic needs are not met, even when they also have unmet "lower" needs? If we take away the hierarchical value system which places some needs higher than others, would it change the way we think about what constitutes a basic and vital need?

Further, aesthetic needs need not be taken as a separate category from other needs. All needs categories have aesthetic components running through them. Aesthetic needs are intertwined with our other needs. As noted above, Maslow eventually conceded that you can pursue higher needs even when lower needs are not 100% met. For example, incarcerated people have access to food and shelter, but the food and shelter they are provided with is inadequate. Their need for food is partially met in that they get enough of it to meet minimal survival conditions for our species, but the aesthetic needs associated with food are not met. There is little to no consideration given to providing them with food that is tasty or diverse in flavor or cultural origins.

While incarcerated people are only able to access the resources that the prison provides for them, which are typically subpar at best or nonexistent at worst, they still manage to find ways to have their needs met to varying degrees. Figuring out a way to make a birthday cake, for example, is more plausible than avoiding guard violence or getting access to adequate healthcare. In this case, the incarcerated person may be able to meet (at least in part) higher needs of belonging, esteem, and self-actualization by engaging in the creative act of baking with and for others, in a way that is still difficult due to the barriers of prison but is nonetheless more

accessible to them than meeting other needs, such as the need for safety, which is foreclosed in the violent setting of prison.[4]

Now that I have discussed aesthetic needs and their role within needs discourse at large, I turn to a discussion of a contemporary branch of aesthetics, everyday aesthetics, which expands our understanding of the aesthetic to include everyday experiences and considerations.

Everyday Aesthetics

It may seem unusual or even problematic to pair aesthetics, which is often regarded as tending primarily to the study of art and beauty, with matters related to incarceration. However, a growing body of literature within aesthetics focuses on the ethical implications of our aesthetic choices and environments.

Traditionally, Western aesthetics has dealt with art objects and natural environments as the focus of our aesthetic appreciation and evaluation. Recent work in everyday aesthetics has broadened the scope of aesthetic theorizing to include more ordinary features of our daily lives. This work helps to illuminate the impact of our aesthetic agency and aesthetic experiences on our wellbeing. There are several principles of everyday aesthetics which are important for my project: the inclusion of sensory and bodily input as a legitimate component of aesthetic experience, the classificatory as opposed to honorific use of the term 'aesthetic' which allows for the inclusion of negative aesthetics, and the consideration of the ethical implications of everyday aesthetics.

One of the primary tasks of everyday aesthetics is to justify the inclusion of sensory and bodily input as legitimate parts of our aesthetic lives. Proponents of everyday aesthetics claim that everyday experiences have aesthetic components that are worthy of our attention. In "The

[4] There is significant research on violence in jails and prisons. See Beck & Harrison, 2008; Levan, 2016; Wolff, Shi, & Bachman, 2008.

Pervasiveness of the Aesthetic in Ordinary Experience" (2008), Sherri Irvin argues that we miss out on much of the aesthetic texture of our lives when we limit our understanding of aesthetic experiences to only the extraordinary encounters in life, such as engaging with the artworld or appreciating nature. While we may not always be conscious of how we respond to sensory stimuli, we are constantly adjusting ourselves according to bodily input. We may prefer natural lighting to fluorescent lighting and avoid turning on the overhead light in our office or choose a different path to our destination according to scenic views, or we may seek out certain fabrics for clothing according to softness on the skin. According to Irvin, this responding and attending to our sensory and bodily input is a part of how we shape our everyday aesthetic experiences.

Further, Irvin argues that paying more attention to the everyday aesthetic texture of our lives can inform us about ourselves and our own values and preferences as well as guide us in moral decision making. She suggests that the environmental problem of overconsumption, for example, may be combatted through seeking out aesthetic pleasure in the goods we already have. As we work to be more intentional and conscious of the aesthetic value of the more ordinary, less examined parts of our lives, we can increase our satisfaction with our aesthetic lives. Still, our ability to cultivate aesthetic appreciation for our day-to-day experiences is impacted by our aesthetic agency. This connection will be discussed later in the chapter.

Yuriko Saito's book *Aesthetics of the Familiar: Everyday Life and World-Making* (2017) presents everyday aesthetic choices and considerations as meaningfully contributing to our lives and the world around us. Saito argues that it is crucial for everyday aesthetics that we understand the term 'aesthetic' in the classificatory sense rather than an honorific sense. An honorific sense of the term 'aesthetic' is value-laden and refers to the 'aesthetic' as having a positive meaning. In other words, the honorific sense of 'aesthetic' conveys a positive aesthetic experience or

association. Utilizing the classificatory sense of 'aesthetic' instead allows for the inclusion of more than just positive aesthetics. Saito (2017) says the following in defense of the classificatory use of 'aesthetics':

> Regarding aesthetics in this value-neutral way is important precisely because the power of the aesthetic can affect us positively or negatively, and in certain contexts, it becomes extremely important that we remain vigilant about the way in which we are thus affected. Such contexts include detecting negative aesthetics in our life and environment, as well as intentional orchestration of aesthetic factors to manipulate people for commercial or political purposes. (p. 28)

Ensuring that our understanding of aesthetics does not rule out that which is aesthetically negative is essential to examining the ethical and political dimensions of aesthetics, especially in relation to dire circumstances such as the conditions of poverty and incarceration which I will explore at length in the following chapters. An emphasis on the honorific sense of the aesthetic may exclude from our purview the existence of negative aesthetics as well as their ethical impact. Working with a classificatory sense of 'aesthetic' instead allows us to remain open to the prevalence of negative or even harmful aesthetic conditions.

Regarding the ethical component of everyday aesthetics, Saito argues that everyday aesthetic considerations have considerable sway on our quality of life and the state of the world. She advocates for the cultivation of aesthetic sensibilities that can lead to our lives being aesthetically richer through the inclusion of everyday aesthetic experiences in our realm of possibilities for aesthetic appreciation. Importantly, she connects aesthetic considerations to moral considerations in many of her examples throughout the book. Saito argues that everyday aesthetics "determines the quality of society, and ultimately the state of the world, for better or

worse." (Saito, 2017, p. 4) The open-mindedness and mindfulness required in developing one's aesthetic sensibility have ethical importance: they lead us to pay careful attention to our surroundings, which may cause us to be more aware of and concerned with not only the aesthetic value but also the moral and political elements present in our environments. For example, attending to the aesthetic choices made in laundry practices can also cause our attention to shift towards the ethical implications of laundering practices that are not environmentally sustainable such as using electric dryers instead of hanging clothes out to dry. (Saito, 2017, p. 115-127) Saito focuses on the aesthetic qualities of laundering to demonstrate how a chore that often feels mundane can involve aesthetic engagement. The aesthetic qualities of laundry include both negative and positive qualities: the smell or unsightly stains of dirty laundry, transformed into laundered items that have a fresh smell and clean appearance. Many of the choices made in the laundering process involve aesthetic considerations: using scented detergents, tumble drying to reduce wrinkles, using stain remover and brightening agents to maintain coloring of garments, etc.

Saito uses these examples to motivate her view that in addition to practical and ethical reasons for our choices, we are also guided by aesthetic reasons. These aesthetically motivated choices can have practical as well as ethical implications. For example, detergents that are ecofriendly perform less well than detergents that use environmentally degrading optical brighteners. Also, using an electric clothes dryer to reduce wrinkles or soften fabric has a significant environmental impact in comparison to using a clothesline to dry clothes sans electricity. Notably, clotheslines are not used as frequently in nations such as the United States for reasons that are also aesthetically motivated. Homeowners' associations often prohibit clotheslines because they are thought to be an eyesore. (Saito, 2017, p. 127) I include these

examples as support for my claim that aesthetic experiences and considerations go beyond our experiences with art, impacting even ordinary, mundane aspects of our day to day lives.

I am especially interested in the value that everyday aesthetic sensibility can have in the lives of those who are in dire circumstances. The everyday aesthetics approach to opening up our boundaries for aesthetic experiences to include more than just extraordinary or beautiful encounters is crucial for recognizing the role of the aesthetic in the lives of people who may have serious limitations on their ability to engage with artful, beautiful experiences. Their lives have an aesthetic texture, positive or negative, which gives us some insight into the conditions of their enjoyment or suffering. With respect to the predicament of living under dire circumstances, Saito (2017) says the following:

> There is another way in which cultivating this everyday aesthetic sensibility can be considered beneficial. This happens when one's everyday life and environment are so desperate and it is beyond one's power to literally change one's predicament, such as living in a battle-scarred zone…. Given that the political situation unfortunately cannot be resolved by individual effort, everyday aesthetic experience can help its residents retain a sense of humanity, dignity, and resilience. (pp. 18-19)

This points to the notion that aesthetic engagement can help people meet some of their needs even when their ability to meet other needs is severely limited by their living conditions. I argue that developing everyday aesthetic sensibility can be a tactic for oppressed people who have constrained capacity for changing their circumstances, as is the case for people living in poverty and/or incarceration. The next section will explore further the impact of experiencing constraints on fulfillment of our aesthetic needs.

Aesthetic Harms

If we recognize aesthetic needs as essentially connected to our wellbeing as people, we should be concerned about any setting that reduces or eliminates the possibility to express ourselves aesthetically or have satisfying aesthetic experiences. *Aesthetic harm* is a term I use to refer to ways in which aesthetic conditions and objects can have adverse effects on individuals' wellbeing. When our aesthetic agency is reduced in capacity, we may find ourselves unable to meet some or all our aesthetic needs. This increases our vulnerability for experiencing aesthetic harm. Aesthetic harm can occur even when some of our aesthetic needs are fulfilled since it is possible to have some needs met and others unmet at any given time. For example, I may have many of my aesthetic needs met in my own home and still encounter aesthetic harm that violates my needs when traveling outside of my home. Aesthetic harm, like harm generally, exists on a spectrum of severity. If I experience my aesthetic needs being mostly met on a day-to-day basis in my own home and workplace but experience aesthetic harm occasionally in my experiences outside of the home, the influence of the aesthetic harm in degrading my wellbeing is much less severe than in a case of prolonged aesthetic harm. Further, just as we do not all have the same aesthetic needs, we do not all experience aesthetic harm in the same circumstances. Both aesthetic needs and aesthetic harm depend on individual needs and preferences.

If we do not acknowledge the importance of aesthetic matters in our wellbeing, we run the risk of letting aesthetic harm go unchecked in situations where we could mediate the harm in some way. In other words, we may be allowing aesthetic harm to damage the wellbeing of many by not recognizing how harmful aesthetic conditions can be and how deeply they can influence our wellbeing. Further, aesthetic harm in institutional settings like prisons or jails can contribute

to processes of dehumanization. I will pick up this discussion on dehumanization as it relates to aesthetic harms in chapter II.

My concept of aesthetic harm draws from work on aesthetic negativity and Saito's argument that moral attitudes can be expressed aesthetically. I will discuss each and how they relate to aesthetic harm.

Arnold Berleant discusses the prevalence of aesthetic negativity not only in art but, more commonly, "in situations that are not ordinarily considered aesthetically: urban environments, cultural practices such as ceremonies and rituals, and the functioning of an organization." (Berleant, 2011, p. 145) He goes on to say that "violence to human sensibility is sometimes difficult to detect but nonetheless frequently profound and even devastating." (Berleant, 2011, p. 145) Berleant uses environmental pollution to demonstrate this point. While it is well known that environmental pollution is harmful to human health and wellbeing, he argues that there is also an aesthetic dimension to the harm caused by pollution: "every form of pollution also includes perceptual insult and causes aesthetic damage, as well. High levels of sound or noise, bad air, excessive visual stimulation, and overcrowding are aesthetically as well as physically damaging." (Berleant, 2011, p. 145-6)

Exposure to aesthetic negativity in everyday life may be unavoidable to some extent, but there are conditions that make it more likely for a person to suffer these harms. The more marginalized you are, the less aesthetic agency you typically have, because you cannot afford to pick from all options available; you are constrained by cost. In addition to or instead of financial limitations, marginalization can also decrease your agency by limiting your time, access to non-financial resources, etc. By *reduced aesthetic agency* I'm referring to circumstances where the ability to engage with aesthetic practices has been limited (by forces external to the individual) in

some capacity. For example, impoverished people are more likely to be subjected to environmental pollution because they are less likely to have access to the resources necessary to move out of an area plagued by pollution or the social capital to have their concerns about pollution in their neighborhoods taken seriously. Further, people who experience incarceration have absolutely no choice in whether they are exposed to environmental pollution or not. Recent studies have found that many US jails and prisons are located on environmentally hazardous sites, exposing people subjected to these sites to significant health risks. (Bernd et al., 2017; Wang, 2022)

The aesthetic harms that occur from environmental pollution demonstrate that not all instances of aesthetic harm involve only sensory deprivation; some attacks on the senses are caused by *too much* sensory input, or sensory overload. The aesthetic harms of carceral spaces involve both sensory deprivation and sensory overload. Sensory deprivation in prisons may refer to a lack of variety in sensory experiences: dull and monochromatic color schemes, hard and cold surfaces, censorship that severely limits access to art and media, bland food devoid of diverse flavor profiles, etc. The same aesthetic elements which contribute to sensory deprivation may also lead to sensory overload. For example, concrete cells with little (if any) décor contribute to sensory deprivation through what they lack. Additionally, the very absence of fixtures which have a dampening effect on sound (e.g. rugs, curtains, thick linens, tapestry, or canvas art on walls, etc.) contributes to sensory overload. The architecture of the cell in coordination with the emptiness of the cell produces echoes which reverberate sounds from an already noisy environment. Other examples of sensory overload include constant fluorescent lighting and the overwhelming smell of too many people with little access to hygiene combined with the powerful scent of bleach and other disinfectants. There's been work done on solitary

confinement and the sensory deprivation it entails as constituting torture (Grassian & Friedman, 1986; Grassian, 2006; James & Vanko, 2021) but not enough work on how prison generally employs aesthetic harm. To engage in aesthetic practices and resist aesthetic harm, incarcerated folks must navigate the restrictions of aesthetic agency and the conditions of deficiency and excess when it comes to their environments. This will be discussed further in Chapter III.

I am especially interested in the ethical implications of aesthetic harm. Saito argues that part of the connection between aesthetics and ethics lies in the ability to show dignity and care for other people through our aesthetic considerations. She says that when it comes to our moral lives, "The focus is usually on the nature of our direct dealing with other humans through actions or conversations. What does not receive sufficient attention is our moral life mediated by the aesthetics of objects we create or handle." (Saito, 2017, p. 150) She uses examples from Japanese artistic traditions such as the tea ceremony and Japanese garden design to illustrate this point. In both examples, the person hosting the tea ceremony or guests in their garden considers what the aesthetic experience of their guest will be like. They imagine what would give the guest the best experience and put effort into ensuring that the details of the event or space cater to the guest's enjoyment. Saito claims that in both cases, the host expresses respect and concern for the guests' feelings through aesthetic means.

What matters here are not the specific details of the aesthetic decisions made by the hosts, but the expression of respect for other humans' feelings and enjoyment through aesthetic means. This idea is a part of Saito's larger argument in the book that our everyday aesthetic choices and considerations contribute to what she refers to as the "world-making project." In other words, we all contribute to building the world around us through our aesthetic considerations: the way we present ourselves, our bodily movements and mannerisms, the objects and spaces we create and

design, the way we interact with our environments, etc. If it is possible to express care and respect for others through an object's or space's design, can we also express disrespect and a lack of regard for others through design? Saito thinks so, and I agree.

Saito gives the example of elder care facilities and hospitals to stress the importance of expressing care for others through aesthetic means. She says, "Usually in institutional settings, choice and placement of decorative objects in public or shared spaces are decided not by the residents, thus compromising the feeling of at-home-ness and the dignity and integrity of the inhabitants." (Saito, 2017, p. 168) Saito describes these cases as demonstrating an "inattentiveness and indifference" to the experience of the inhabitants which is expressed aesthetically through the lack of regard for their aesthetic agency, or choice. (Saito, 2017, p. 169)

I suggest that this lack of regard for the dignity and wellbeing of others, expressed aesthetically, constitutes a type of aesthetic harm. Aesthetic harm, then, occurs when disregard or disrespect for others is expressed aesthetically. This may happen through a disregard for or restriction on aesthetic agency, or it may be inflicted because of interactions with objects and environments that were not designed with their dignity and experience in mind.

In Saito's example of institutional medical centers there is a lack of consideration regarding the importance of their inhabitants' aesthetic agency in adorning their space. This is certainly also the case in other institutional settings, such as prisons. Beyond the disregard for (or suppression of) inhabitants' aesthetic agency, prisons also embody another type of aesthetic harm which is inflicted through design choices in the objects and environments which construct the prison. These design choices disregard the experience of the inhabitants at best and, at worst, demonstrate a lack of respect for their human dignity. For example, toothbrushes manufactured for use in prisons are designed to prevent weaponization. Typically, this involves removing the

hard plastic handle which is used to grip the toothbrush for brushing. The fingertip toothbrush is one such example, designed to be worn as a plastic sleeve on the fingertip with plastic bristles.[5] These products are not only inferior in terms of their ability to promote oral hygiene, but they are also demoralizing to their users. This will be discussed at length in chapter III.

Aesthetic Harm and Agency

When considering aesthetic needs and harms, the degree of aesthetic agency available to the subject is acutely relevant in determining what makes something harmful or not. The connection to aesthetic agency should demonstrate that aesthetic harm is not just anything which is aesthetically negative or displeasing. Our ability to leave aesthetically harmful experiences or avoid aesthetically harmful objects depends on our agency. Limitations on aesthetic agency thus increase our vulnerability to aesthetic harm. Sherri Irvin's concept of 'aesthetic blight' is helpful for considering this relationship between aesthetic agency and aesthetic harm. Irvin argues that aesthetic blight is composed of two conditions: "(1) persistent exposure to aesthetically aversive stimuli and (2) restricted aesthetic agency in responding to these stimuli." (Irvin, 2024)

The degree of aesthetic agency available to you directly influences your ability to take action to alleviate anything in your environment which is aesthetically unpleasant or harmful to you. Limitations on your aesthetic agency make it much more likely for you to become stuck in a situation of persistent aesthetic harm, or aesthetic blight, which negatively impacts wellbeing.

There are cases where the cause of an unpleasant aesthetic experience may not be injustice, e.g. a natural weather event like rain at an outdoor concert, but this may still result in the concert-goer's dissatisfaction with the aesthetic quality of the event. In this case, there is no injustice, just bad luck. Despite the restrictions on your aesthetic agency (the weather that is

[5] See the toothbrush design here: https://www.bobbarker.com/fingertip-toothbrush-125?page=2

clearly out of your control) which have negatively impacted your concert experience, you retain some aesthetic agency in leaving the now unpleasant situation. Assuming you can leave the concert when you have had enough of the rain, your aesthetic agency to remove yourself from this unpleasant experience is still intact. Whether or not this example constitutes an aesthetic harm is ultimately dependent on the aesthetic needs of the concertgoer. To the extent this unpleasant aesthetic experience constitutes aesthetic harm, it is certainly a relatively minor harm in terms of the severity of impact on one's overall wellbeing. I would classify this event as only minorly harmful because of the short duration of the unpleasant experience (a concert is only a few hours long regardless of the weather) and the lack of harmful intent in the unpleasant conditions of the event (no one made it rain to harm concertgoers).

The scope of this project encompasses types of aesthetic harm which are related to injustice and loss of aesthetic agency. I want to consider cases where aesthetic harm is inflicted maliciously, such as the use of aesthetic harm in carceral contexts. For example, Walker (2012) found locating a waste processing plant in a residential area was intentional, with malice and ill effects for the people living there. Thus, there is evidence to suggest that at least in some cases, waste sites are built near lower-income neighborhoods where residents are perceived to have less power to fight back against the construction of a harmful site. (Walker, 2012; Taylor, 2014) This neglect for the residents' well-being because of the benefits to the company (in terms of profits and reduced hassle fighting a community which has power to demand they do not build there) could also be understood as malicious and constituting an aesthetic harm.

Aesthetic harm happens in circumstances where access to satisfying (to the actor) opportunities to express oneself creatively and/or experience positive aesthetic conditions is severely limited or constrained (intentionally or unintentionally). This harm can take a variety of

forms in different circumstances. When one is subjected to conditions of poverty, they may lack the resources to participate in certain aesthetic experiences. For example, adorning and caring for my space is an everyday aesthetic practice that I find particularly rewarding. This experience is constrained by my ability to spend money on items not directly related to survival, such as décor or plants.

When considering our own access to creative expression, we may ask ourselves: what amount of time and resources are available to me to enact or otherwise engage with my own creativity? What sort of factors hinder my ability to engage with aesthetics in ways that are meaningful to me? I suggest that aesthetic agency plays a role in our ability to express ourselves creatively. Aesthetic agency also mediates our ability to access satisfying aesthetic experiences and avoid harmful ones.

Aesthetic agency is not simply present or absent; it can be available in degrees or differ in quality (lack, loss, restriction, etc.) I enjoy a higher degree of aesthetic agency than someone who is locked up in a carceral institution, while still being limited by my own socioeconomic status. And still, there are ways for people who have considerably less aesthetic agency, like the incarcerated individual, to enact some degree of aesthetic agency. Thus, it makes sense to think about aesthetic agency as a spectrum where people may have enhanced or reduced aesthetic agency. Aesthetic agency is reduced in circumstances where one's ability to engage with aesthetic practice and experience has been limited by forces external to the individual in some capacity, such as in the case of a prisoner being limited by the warden's rules about which types of creative practices are permissible or forbidden. We will see through examples in later chapters that aesthetic needs and the drive for aesthetic expression and satisfactions are so strong that

even folks with severely reduced aesthetic agency may find a way to engage in aesthetic practices.

If there are differences in how individuals experience aesthetic needs, the same must be true of aesthetic harm, which involves unmet aesthetic needs. Aesthetic harm is also not experienced in the same way by all people. Differences in aesthetic needs and aesthetic harm depend on personal taste and preferences, as well as the ways in which prior experiences may have shaped expectations and aesthetic preferences. (Examples will be discussed below.) Aesthetic harm does not look the same for everyone. We cannot list all things aesthetically harmful in themselves because aesthetic harm is related to the recipient of that harm. Aesthetic harm is defined by the relationship between aesthetic agency and personal preferences for aesthetic satisfaction or taste. When I teach aesthetics, I ask students to describe their environments to me (dorm room, apartment, etc.) and to consider what they find aesthetically pleasing and displeasing about their environment. Each student not only has their own distinct taste for décor, but their degrees of awareness or interest in considering the aesthetic conditions of their spaces also vary greatly. Some students remark that they really could not care less about how their space looks or feels to be in, or that they had never considered this as important to their well-being or satisfaction. Perhaps those students really do not have this aesthetic need, or perhaps it has been met under the conditions they live in, and they do not have to engage as much with what it may be like to not have these needs met. Also at play here is the role of aesthetic agency. If they have the choice and the means to do otherwise with their space, but they are satisfied with the unadorned walls and the limited expression of decoration in the space, then it seems there is nothing wrong with saying that their aesthetic need is satisfied, even if for another person, the bar for clearing this aesthetic need could be higher. For myself, for example,

I place a very high importance on the spaces I dwell in reflecting my tastes and aesthetic interests. I have been known to take the time and effort required to decorate a space according to my own aesthetic needs in cases where others may not have found it important, such as short-term living situations like 3–6-month leases. The spectrum of aesthetic needs underscores the significance of aesthetic agency: to fulfill these needs, we must be able to tailor our aesthetic experiences, a freedom which tends to be severely limited in United States jails and prisons.

Conclusion

Aesthetic needs are not always recognized as true needs, but they should be. We can look to our own lived experiences and the experiences of others, as well as the growing literature on everyday aesthetics, to consider the ways in which the aesthetic texture of our lives impacts our wellbeing. Aesthetic needs can refer to our need to enact aesthetic agency or our need to have aesthetically fulfilling experiences. There is a relationship between our aesthetic agency and our aesthetic experiences: our degree of available aesthetic agency determines what kind of role we can have in seeking out or creating positive aesthetic experiences. Our aesthetic agency also influences our ability to remove ourselves from experiences of aesthetic harm. Similarly, our aesthetic environments may influence our ability to enact our aesthetic agency.

While the everyday aesthetics literature gives us resources to think about negative aesthetics, it has not deeply examined the concept in the context of incarceration, which is the focus of my project. In carceral studies, scholars have begun to recognize the impact of art on the experience of incarceration, but the role of everyday aesthetics beyond art experiences on the lives of the incarcerated is unexplored. My project seeks to close this gap, exploring how conditions of poverty and incarceration are influenced by aesthetic harms or aesthetically negative conditions. In the next chapter, I offer an account of the relationship between aesthetic

harm and dehumanization, demonstrating the role that aesthetic harm plays in reinforcing and creating dehumanizing attitudes towards oppressed groups.

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Chapter II. The Relationship between Aesthetic Harm and Dehumanization

In this chapter, I offer an account of the relationship between aesthetic harm, aesthetic agency, and dehumanization, demonstrating the role that aesthetic harm plays in reinforcing and creating dehumanizing attitudes towards the incarcerated through the loss of aesthetic agency. Aesthetic harm can be a *form* of dehumanization, an active and reinforcing mechanism for creating or perpetuating dehumanization through negating of aesthetic agency. Aesthetic harm can also be a *sign* of dehumanization, indicating that prior dehumanization has occurred to the person or population experiencing these harms. Prior dehumanization can allow aesthetic harms to be enacted with little moral concern for the person or population experiencing those harms. This chapter explores the relationship between aesthetic harm, aesthetic agency, and dehumanization. I also review literature on the phenomenon of dehumanization to build my argument about this relationship.

As discussed in chapter 1, not all instances of aesthetic harm are related to injustice. However, I focus on aesthetic harms which are incurred as a result of being a member of an oppressed group. Aesthetic harm can come from a restriction of one's aesthetic agency, restricting the ability to express oneself aesthetically or to engage in satisfying aesthetic experiences (and leave or avoid harmful aesthetic experiences). Aesthetic harm may come from the presence of unpleasant aesthetic stimuli (negative aesthetics, sensory overload), or it may come from the lack of aesthetic richness in an environment (aesthetic deprivation). In this chapter, I demonstrate how aesthetic harms are used to dehumanize and punish in ways that are not conducive to remedying the variety of social ills that lead people to end up in poverty or incarceration. First, I offer an account of the relationship between aesthetic harm and dehumanization. Then, I'll connect this account to the literature on dehumanization, with a focus

on why and how it occurs. Finally, I'll discuss the connection between dehumanization and aesthetic harm as a form of punishment in US carceral institutions and compare these approaches to incarceration to more humane carceral systems internationally.

Dehumanization and Aesthetic Harm

The most basic concept of dehumanization involves regarding human beings as subhuman. This definition is straightforward enough, but there are disagreements regarding how exactly this belief that other humans are subhuman is realized in the mind of the beholder. What are the social and political conditions which contribute to dehumanization? The aesthetic conditions? The psychological processes? The answers to these questions are relevant for our ability to recognize dehumanization when it occurs and to combat its harmful effects.

In Chapter I, I argued that humans have aesthetic needs which are integral to our overall wellbeing. Work in psychology acknowledges these needs, even when it hierarchizes them as less fundamental than other needs, and everyday aesthetics also connects daily aesthetic concerns to our overall wellbeing as people. If we recognize aesthetic needs as essential to human welfare, we should be concerned with conditions which inhibit aesthetic agency, hindering possibilities for satisfying aesthetic needs. Under conditions which make it difficult to express aesthetic agency, aesthetic harm may occur from unmet aesthetic needs or prolonged exposure to aesthetic blight, or negatively aesthetic conditions (Irvin, 2024, Unpublished manuscript).

Recognizing aesthetic needs as true human needs entails recognition of the role of aesthetics in human experience. Humans pursue complex aesthetic endeavors and experience and express their aesthetic appreciation for their environments, types of media, objects in our world, and so on. Because we do not recognize these acts of pursuing aesthetic engagement at the level of sophistication which humans do in other animal species or automated machines, we consider

these aesthetic pursuits to be exclusive to human beings. Further, scholars like Ellen Dissanayake have argued that aesthetic activity is universal to all human cultures, signifying its role as an especially important part of human life. “This universality of making and enjoying art immediately suggests that an important appetite or need is being expressed.” (Dissanayake, 1995, p. xiii) Aesthetic engagement is a part of our nature which is unique to human beings and engaging in the aesthetic is essential to our wellbeing and satisfaction.

As previously argued, denial of these aesthetic needs can lead to aesthetic harm. The implications of aesthetic harm can go beyond having an unpleasant or negative aesthetic experience or lacking positive aesthetic fulfilment. Sustained aesthetic harm which denies people their aesthetic agency and ability to fulfill their aesthetic needs can advance dehumanization. Dehumanization occurs when people perceive an individual or a group of people as not expressing the qualities of humanness. Since aesthetic needs are uniquely human, a denial of aesthetic needs (and/or sustained exposure to aesthetic harm) also involves a denial of humanity. Instances of aesthetic harm that contribute to such dehumanization are severe cases, meaning someone’s ability to participate in aesthetic activity or enjoy aesthetic goods is significantly undermined. This is the case for incarceration, where there are severe restrictions to aesthetic agency and satisfying aesthetic experiences.

What causes us to deny the humanness of others? Much of the literature on dehumanizing propaganda focuses on the dehumanizing language in the media. There is significant scholarship on the use of dehumanizing language, analyzing the political use of referring to subjugated groups of people as vermin, cockroaches, aliens (Haslam, 2015; Mendelsohn et al., 2020; Smith, 2021; Steuter & Willis, 2010). This is undoubtedly an important factor in dehumanization, but I

argue there are other, everyday aesthetic elements of dehumanization which ought to be explored further.

Although not my focus here, it is worth noting an additional type of aesthetic harm which connects to dehumanizing representations of targeted groups. Aesthetic harm in the media which contributes to dehumanization can include mugshots and popular culture depictions of incarceration which perpetuate harmful stereotypes. Nicole Fleetwood writes about this area of carceral aesthetics, concerned with how the public views the incarcerated and how that viewpoint is influenced by media. She argues that visual representation around incarceration contributes to dehumanizing people who are marked as criminal, reinforcing our attitudes towards them as a population of people not only unworthy of our moral concern, but often worthy of our scorn.

> Representation was an essential tool for support tough crime policies and punitive sentencing. Ass Assaultive and dehumanizing images, such as "wanted" posters, arrest photographs, crime-scene images and mug shots circulated frequently in local and national media and reinforced the practices of aggressive policing and dominant notions of black criminality. (Fleetwood, 2020, p. xvi)

Scholars like Fleetwood have recognized the power of the aesthetic to harm and contribute to dehumanization through images like mugshots and crime scene photographs which circulate through the news and contribute to our negative perception of "criminals." She highlights also the racism present in this process, with the especially dehumanizing representations of Black people in the news and other media related to crime and punishment. My project turns the focus onto types of aesthetic harm which involve undermining the aesthetic experience or agency of the targeted person. This form of aesthetic harm contributes to dehumanization through everyday

aesthetic experiences, such as mealtimes, clothing options, environmental conditions, and other day-to-day practices, rather than through media representation.

Aesthetic harm can also contribute to dehumanization through our everyday aesthetic experiences. For example, walking by a tent city of unhoused neighbors can elicit reactions of disgust from outside observers due to the poor aesthetic conditions of being unhoused. People subjected to living outdoors in tent cities do not have access to waste management, from trash to human waste, which leads to foul odors and may also be visually disturbing to encounter. They also lack access to running water and basic hygiene necessities, which can further contribute to unpleasant sensory qualities in the camp as well as the unhoused people themselves. Research has indicated that disgust can promote dehumanizing attitudes towards others, even when controlling for existing bias towards that group. (Buckels &Trapnell, 2013) There is also evidence that disgust can facilitate dehumanization through weakening the perceptions of humanity in the targeted person or group. (Harris & Fiske, 2007)

Feelings of disgust are often driven by sensory perceptions and our evaluations of those perceptions, making disgust an aesthetically rich phenomenon. Carolyn Korsmeyer's work on disgust examines this aesthetic role. She says that disgust was not originally considered an emotion which we may have some control over but an automatic bodily response. "Terrible tastes and noxious stenches – and even certain visual displays – cause immediate, automatic recoil, often even before one has fully identified the object of aversion." (Korsmeyer, 2022, p. 20) Still, while disgust responses to repugnant odors may be automatic responses which are difficult to avoid, Korsmeyer believes that disgust is an emotional response which we can work to overcome, even if not entirely. She notes the difference between human and animal response

to disgust, noting a distinctly human quality to disgust that implies that it is more than an automated bodily response to stimuli.

> Animals manifest distaste that makes them turn away from toxins and bad tasting food, but in humans the disgust response has an enormous range that far exceeds responses to unpalatable foods to include bodily wastes, signs of infection, violation of the bodily envelope (infestation, gore, mutilation), rotting corpses and other signals of recent death… What is more, the powerful quality of this aversion promotes extension beyond its core triggers into more abstract regions of evaluation. For expressions of disgust migrate into the moral realm as well, being prompted by filth, depravity, sexual perversion, anti-social practices, and – dangerously – by groups to whom such traits are attributed. (Korsmeyer, 2022, p. 20)

This is interesting for strengthening the connection between disgust and aesthetics, since aesthetic engagement at the level of sophistication that humans participate in is thought to be a uniquely human attribute. This also suggests, to Korsmeyer's point, that disgust can be overcome, at least in part, meaning that we may be able to work against the consequences of disgust which lead us to reinforce oppression towards a particular group. "While uncontrolled disgust can render us helpless when we should act and hardhearted when we should care, it also opens territory that demands understanding and that does not require that it be overcome entirely." (Korsmeyer, 2022, p. 29) She suggests we learn to pay attention to our disgust, what triggers it and how it causes us to respond to the object of our disgust, in order to overcome at least partially the effects of disgust which lead us to be "hardhearted when we should care." This understanding of the aesthetic qualities which contribute to our disgust and the social consequences of viewing others with disgust is useful for thinking about the relationship between

aesthetic harm and dehumanization. In a society where normative hygiene practices exist and cannot be followed by people without access to certain products, running water, laundering facilities, etc., we must recognize the moral and political dimension of responding to foul odors or appearances considered unkempt with disgust. When we let that disgust influence our moral concern for the object of the disgust, we allow aesthetic harm to contribute to the dehumanization of those subjected to it.

Similarly, I argue in this chapter that harmful aesthetic conditions within jails and prisons themselves can contribute to dehumanization. These conditions can facilitate dehumanization of the incarcerated by the guards and staff. Aesthetic harm may also contribute to a person experiencing themselves as less human, indicating a process of self-dehumanization. Psychologists use the term 'self-dehumanization' to refer to the effects of dehumanization on the dehumanized themselves. Self-dehumanization has been shown to have a negative influence one's feelings, self-awareness, mental states, and behaviors. (Bastian and Crimston, 2014) The effects of dehumanization on the incarcerated should thus be acknowledged as influencing not only how others see the incarcerated, but how they view themselves. This self-dehumanization almost certainly has effects on how successfully formerly incarcerated people are able to reenter society.[6]

Certain institutions are designed with a "bare minimum" in mind, leaving aesthetic considerations to the side, and often these are public institutions most frequented by people who occupy lower socioeconomic status. Meanwhile, institutions that are exclusive to those with means to access them can and do get closer to prioritizing aesthetic needs. We calculate a sort of "bare minimum to survival" when we are considering serving disempowered groups. This

[6] The research on dehumanization and reentry seems to center the role of dehumanization as it influences outsiders' view of the dehumanized. See, e.g., Jensen, 2020.

standard is not always spoken or made explicit, but sometimes it is. In the case of incarcerated people, very specific guidelines are used to ensure that the bare minimum nutritional needs are being met for the lowest possible cost without consideration for the aesthetic quality of the food: its taste, appearance, smell, etc., or the impact of these aesthetic qualities on their quality of life. This neglect of the aesthetic needs of the incarcerated targets their human sensibilities in a way that dehumanizes. Philosopher Katya Mandoki's concept of "aesthetic poisoning" is helpful for unpacking this connection between inhumanity and aesthetic experience. On aesthetic poisoning and its impact on our humanity and proclivity to violence, she says: "Cruelty is not only a moral category but an aesthetic one: it always targets sensibility." (Mandoki, 2007, p. 38) Mandoki describes aesthetic poisoning as the cutting off of our ability to enjoy aesthetic engagement and "the numbing or lesion of sensibility by aesthetic violence." (Mandoki, 2007, p. 69) She says:

> Normally sensibility should flow freely at each opportunity that presents itself, since joy is our natural disposition to life. Aesthetic violence, however, blocks sensibility when it ceases to be a source of joy causing only pain. Those who lead a privileged life of aesthetic nourishment and stimuli in benevolent environments can maintain their sensibility open. On the other hand, those who are continually exposed to aesthetic violence by inhabiting sordid, noisy, malodorous spaces, or lead a stressful and aggressively competitive life are *latched-by* and forced to block their sensibility to avoid suffering. (Mandoki, 2007, p. 69, emphasis in original)

She offers a relatively mundane example of aesthetic violence cutting off our sensibility because of aesthetic poisoning: the way workers may "tune out" the noisy, crowded, unsatisfying and overwhelming aesthetic experience of commuting to work. She suggests that a similar but much more severe process happens in situations where people are subjected to aesthetic violence as a

method of causing them harm, such as in contexts of social and political conflict. The exposure to aesthetic violence, or what I call aesthetic harm, can limit someone's ability to engage freely with sensations and aesthetic value in their daily lives. According to Mandoki, aesthetic violence which leads to aesthetic poisoning causes the victims of this harm to inhibit their sensuous and aesthetic experiences to avoid further pain and suffering. This denies people the opportunity to engage in something which we see as importantly connected to our humanity and wellbeing: aesthetic engagement which is more than just painful or violent. The distinct humanness of aesthetic exploration and appreciation is exactly what makes the denial of aesthetic agency so sinister: it is a denial of a part of what makes us human.

Aesthetic harm can be understood both as a form of and a sign of dehumanization. As a form, aesthetic harm can be understood as a method of dehumanization which utilizes aesthetics. For example, prison uniforms contribute to stripping prisoners of their individual identities, which is a component of dehumanization. They remove sartorial agency and mark individuals with their Department of Corrections number, rather than their names. Aesthetic harm as a sign of dehumanization refers to the phenomenon where prior exposure to dehumanization reinforces future subjection to aesthetic harm; thus seeing that someone is being aesthetically harmed suggests that they have been dehumanized. Aesthetic harm, in severe cases, can contribute to others seeing the victim of aesthetic harm as less human. There is research which suggests that already viewing someone as less-than-human due to prior dehumanization contributes to the inhumane treatment of those people. In Haney (2008) the connection between dehumanization and mistreatment is brought out in connection to the lack of agency that the incarcerated experience. In Supermax prisons, where restrictions on agency and the threat of punishment for violating prison rules is especially high, prisoners are unable to have much of a life at all.

> Supermax prisoners live minimal existences or worse obeying orders, or not-and begin to seem like minimal people. In such a place, as Morris (2000) noted, "the prisoners become more dehumanized" to the staff and "the temptation is strong to treat them as less than a human being" (p. 107). (Haney, 2008, p. 970)

When aesthetic needs are denied and aesthetic agency severely restricted, the incarcerated in these facilities suffer a severe loss of many aspects of life which are a part of our humanity: preparing and sharing meals, adorning ourselves and our spaces, expressing ourselves creatively, etc. Thus, there can be a feedback loop occurring with aesthetic harm: prior exposure to aesthetic harms in the form of dehumanization increases the likelihood of continued exposure to mistreatment, involving both aesthetic harm and other types of harm. Haney notes this feedback loop, too:

> In their degraded state, brought about by the deprived circumstances under which they live and their absolute dependency on their captors, much of the prisoners' humanity is suppressed, hidden, shielded from view, or disfigured…As I say, it is hard for prisoners to initiate behavior at all in these places, let alone to act and represent themselves as full human beings with true personhood and multidimensional lives and relationships that predate their stay in supermax…A self-fulfilling prophecy is created in which guards see prisoners acting in precisely the degraded terms and within the narrow dehumanized constructs that have been assigned to them, confirming their disparaging views, and justifying-even escalating-their mistreatment. (2008, p. 976)

The harmful conditions that the incarcerated are subjected to end up contributing to their own dehumanization, reaffirming in the eyes of the guards watching over them that they are less than human.

In “Dehumanization: An Integrative Review,” psychologist Nick Haslam (2006) argues that we view others as human to the extent that we view them as possessing certain psychological characteristics. He argues that “a theoretically adequate concept of dehumanization requires a clear understanding of ‘humanness’—the quality that is denied to others when they are dehumanized—and that most theoretical approaches have failed to specify one.” (Haslam, 2006, p. 1) His account offers two types of dehumanization: animalistic and mechanistic dehumanization. These two types are based on two senses of humanness, which Haslam characterizes as the uniquely human account of human characteristics and the human nature account. He understands the uniquely human category as including characteristics which separate humans from other animal species, while human nature represents the characteristics that we consider to be fundamental to human beings. He clarifies the distinction with the following example:

> Characteristics that are typically or essentially human—that represent the concept’s “core”—may not be the same ones that distinguish us from other species. Having wings is a core characteristic of birds, but not a reliable criterion for distinguishing them from other creatures, and curiosity might be a fundamental human attribute despite not being unique to Homo sapiens. (Haslam, 2006, p. 256)

Haslam distinguishes between these two accounts of human characteristics because he believes the violation of each category leads to two different, corresponding types of dehumanization. Animalistic dehumanization relies on denying that people have the attributes that make us uniquely human. Mechanistic dehumanization objectifies those who it targets, viewing them as lacking individuality. It seems that in many cases, there is overlap between the two categories of humanness being denied and the two types of dehumanization being employed.

Haslam's account of humanness as a necessary component improves our understanding of dehumanization by specifying what is targeted or denied in the dehumanized.

Aesthetic harm can be a mechanism for dehumanization under either of Haslam's types of dehumanization, because both definitions of "humanness" invoke aesthetic elements. In some cases, animalistic and mechanistic dehumanization may be present in the same example of aesthetic harm. For example, prison uniforms can contribute to both mechanistic and animalistic dehumanization. Prison uniforms treat people as fungible, a trait of mechanistic dehumanization, by stripping them of their individuality. When everyone wears the same uniform (sometimes in different colors representing different statuses within the institution) marked with a number to identify them rather than their name, we may view the prisoners as mutually interchangeable rather than fully individual persons. Forcing people to wear a prison uniform also means that they are unable to express sartorial agency according to their own cultural preferences, a denial of culture which is seen as a uniquely human characteristic and could also constitute animalistic dehumanization. Culture encompasses and is directly tied to many aesthetic elements of human life: what we eat, wear, and listen to, our taste, aesthetic norms, and so on are all parts of our culture. Thus, the denial of culture can be expressed through a denial of aesthetic needs and/or agency.

When we feed incarcerated people very low-quality food to meet their bare minimum sustenance needs, both animalistic and mechanistic dehumanization may be present. Animalistic dehumanization comes into play since we see having good taste as a uniquely human attribute and therefore eating food which does not prioritize good taste is associated with the behavior of animals. Mechanistic dehumanization can be present here because the sort of cost-cutting calculations that do not consider good taste as an important criterion for food treat those who are

incarcerated as socially distant objects, lacking human nature. In this context, feeding becomes a mere maintenance action, like putting gas in a car, rather than an aesthetic experience. The connection to aesthetic dehumanization comes from the way that aesthetic considerations are tied up with what we consider to be distinctly human qualities or parts of human nature. In other words, if we consider certain aesthetic practices to be uniquely human, depriving people of aesthetic agency or experiences can be dehumanizing. Now that the relationship between aesthetic harm and dehumanization has been introduced, I turn to discussing the role of dehumanization in our treatment and perceptions of incarcerated people in the US.

Motivations for and the Impact of Dehumanization

Why do we dehumanize? Philosopher and psychoanalyst David Livingstone Smith (*Making Monsters: The Uncanny Power of Dehumanization*, 2021) argues that dehumanizing others is something which any of us can be susceptible to, and that recognizing this potential to fall into traps of dehumanization is a necessary step towards undoing the harms of dehumanization in our society. Smith uses his psychology background to argue that human beings are hypersocial creatures and, as such, are endowed with faculties which prevent us from easily committing violence and atrocities against one another so that we may coexist successfully. These faculties make it possible for us to easily recognize other humans as a part of the extended human community, making it very difficult to torture or kill them.[7]

How, then, do we become capable of justifying (and sometimes perpetrating) torture and genocide towards others? Smith argues that unfortunately, there are and always have been advantages to killing, harming, and enslaving others. “Dehumanizing beliefs are often

[7] Smith notes that there are people who lack these psychological roadblocks to harming and killing another human being, but that these people possess psychological conditions which are not common in the general human population; they are in the minority.

entrenched ideological beliefs that proliferated because at some point in time they advantaged one group of people at the expense of another." (Smith, 2021, p. 256) The people who benefit from the oppression or eradication of others thus benefit from propagating dehumanizing ideology and propaganda which according to Smith can work to override our natural psychological inhibitions against harming others. Dehumanization is only one way of disabling these inhibitions; Smith also mentions the use of religious or political ideologies as well as drugs to dull the senses to kill. He views these methods of dehumanizing a group or person as a sort of solution to a problem, the problem of needing to override these psychological faculties which make it difficult to harm each other to experience the benefits (for a particular group) of dominating and harming another group.

Smith's work on dehumanization also involves explaining the "paradox of dehumanization." The paradox is that dehumanization involves treatment of a person which regards them as simultaneously human and subhuman. Understanding the processes which leads us to have this split in our common sense, to be able to view another person as both a human being and less than human, is important so that we can recognize the causes of dehumanization and envision solutions for undoing dehumanization where it occurs.

Smith's body of work deeply examines the paradox of dehumanization, arguing that regarding a human as subhuman is not the only aspect at play in dehumanization. Smith situates the contradiction of regarding another as both wholly subhuman and wholly human with examples from late 19th century lynchings. The horrific process of brutally murdering a person as a punishment for alleged crime while thousands of people watch with glee, racing to collect human remains as souvenirs after the victim of the lynching is deceased, does not align with how we would treat a subhuman creature, such as an animal, in response to any wrongdoing they

could have enacted. Put differently, the contempt and disgust shown for the Black men in these examples is not usually applied to animals. If we see a living creature as subhuman, we do not assign them human characteristics like moral agency which are necessary to hold them morally culpable for their wrongdoings. Thus, it seems that when we are dehumanizing a person or group, we are not simply viewing them as subhuman. We are holding them to the same moral standards as a human being who is culpable for their actions while also viewing them as less than human in the sense that they are uniquely worthy of being treated inhumanely as a form of punishment for their (alleged or actual) wrongdoings. Thus, he convincingly argues that what seem to be contradictory concepts can coexist. This is especially clear in the context of incarceration, where prisoners are treated inhumanely as a punishment for a wrongdoing, a culpability that we would only assign humans coupled with treatment which we would not consider humane if it was happening to people whose humanity we fully respect.

In Smith's view there are further implications to this contradiction. We should not see dehumanization merely as a way of becoming morally disengaged when it comes to a certain group and their struggles. When we dehumanize others, we do not ignore the moral implications of harming someone; we may also see it as a morally good thing to harm this dehumanized group (through genocide, torture, imprisonment, etc.). To understand how this moral imperative to harm is generated, Smith describes how dehumanization can morph into "making monsters" or what other scholars have termed "demonization." (Vasiljevic & Viki, 2014)

As Smith argues, when we dehumanize people, we cannot help but respond to them as human beings and at the same time, we hold a belief that they are subhuman. This contradiction creates a disturbance which may render the dehumanized subject creepy or dangerous because of this uncanny recognition of both humanity and sub humanness. To further explicate

demonization, Smith discusses German psychiatrist Ernst Jentsch's 1906 paper titled (in English translation) "On the Psychology of the Uncanny." The two works delve into the disturbance created when the dehumanized are perceived as creepy or dangerous because of the contradiction. Smith prefers to translate Jentsch's "uncanny" to "creepy" because in English uncanny can have a positive or even laudatory meaning, whereas Jentsch takes uncanniness to have an explicitly unsettling connotation. Jentsch wanted to understand what causes us to experience being creeped out or disturbed by something. Smith summarizes Jentsch as arguing that we experience something as creepy when we can't decide what kind of thing it is. We treat it as two different natural kinds at the same time. For example, wax figures of human beings can be extremely lifelike in their appearance and yet upon closer observation, we can tell that they are not alive since the eyes aren't moving, the skin isn't quite right, etc. (Smith, 2021, p.143) If your mind can't decisively settle on one or another, inanimate object or animate being, your reaction is to experience the thing as disturbing or creepy. Thus, the experience of perceiving another as uncanny or creepy has an aesthetic component and could be considered an aesthetic experience. Understanding uncanniness as a contributor to dehumanization, we should be concerned with the ways that aesthetic harm contributes to others' perception of the humanity (or inhumanity) of the target of that aesthetic harm.

Smith argues that this is akin to what occurs with the paradox of dehumanization. When we experience a person as both human and subhuman, we experience them as transgressing natural kinds and being "metaphysically dangerous" which causes us to be creeped out by them, to view them as monsters. We are disturbed by the paradox that they represent. Thus, in addition to seeing a person subjected to these phenomena as dehumanized, we also see them as an

unnatural kind, a monster. Smith sees demonization as a possible consequence of dehumanization and the paradox that accompanies it.

According to Smith, when we demonize others, we perceive them as monsters which need to be eradicated from society to protect the rest of us. It is because of demonization as a consequence of sustained dehumanization that Smith argues we end up not only neglecting to have moral concern for the mistreatment of groups subjected to this framing, but that we also generate a moral imperative to get rid of these monsters which we perceive as threatening. This viewing of others as monsters makes us feel justified and even righteous in our activities of harm against them. Smith observes an especially troubling contradiction in our tendency to create monstrous others. The groups which we dehumanize and turn into monsters, and thus perceive as the most threatening among us, are often the most vulnerable groups in our society. Smith connects this phenomenon to super-humanization, the process by which we see dehumanized people "as formidably threatening, because they are both malevolent and endowed with powers that exceed those of ordinary human beings." (Smith, 2021, p. 264) When both superhuman traits and an absence of human traits have been ascribed to a dehumanized group, the paradox is especially clear, leading to demonization.

Superhuman traits are not inherently negative in the way dehumanizing traits are. In fact, in certain contexts superhuman traits may have a positive connotation, such as describing a person's extraordinary talents. But in the context of dehumanization, superhuman traits add to the perception of the other as dangerous through enhancing the paradox which disturbs us. Smith uses testimony from Darren Wilson, the Ferguson police officer who shot and killed Michael Brown, to demonstrate this phenomenon. Wilson told jurors the following about his encounter with Brown: "When I grabbed him, the only way I can describe it is I felt like a five-year-old

holding on to Hulk Hogan." (Sanburn, 2014) This perception of Brown as possessing extreme strength compared to the average human reflects a superhuman trait which is frequently ascribed to Black men in this country, a notion of extra human strength. This trait is sometimes accompanied by the racist stereotype that Black people are less likely to feel pain (Hoffman et al., 2016), something which Wilson also appealed to in his description of Brown seeming unimpeded by the shots being fired at him. "At this point it looked like he was almost bulking up to run through the shots, like it was making him mad that I'm shooting at him … And the face that he had was looking straight through me, like I wasn't even there, I wasn't even anything in his way." (Sanburn, 2014) Earlier in the testimony, Wilson describes Brown's reaction to Wilson firing his gun for the first time, inside the patrol car after the first struggle between the two had occurred. "He looked up at me, and had the most intense, aggressive face. The only way I can describe it – it looks like a demon. That's how angry he looked." (Sanburn, 2014) This is a very straightforward example of demonization where Wilson describes Brown in both superhuman and dehumanized terms. He attributes to Brown superhuman size, strength, and possibly the ability to remain unphased by bullets, while also referring to Brown as "it" and literally describing him as looking like a demon, which are clearly dehumanizing frames.

Other scholars have addressed demonization's role in the context of the criminal justice system. "This demonization, which can be conceived as a more radical form of dehumanization, gives people a moral mandate to take extreme measures, including violence against offenders." (Quote retrieved from Skitka, 2002; Skitka & Mullen, 2002; as cited in Vasiljevic & Viki, 2014, p. 187) My project centers in this area of dehumanization and demonization. I am most concerned with why more people do not express or experience moral outrage about the abysmal and inhumane conditions of US jails and prisons. I see dehumanization and its more extreme

versions such as monster-making or demonization as responsible for this lack of moral outrage for improving carceral conditions (from some, not all members of the US, to be sure). Not only do these processes contribute to a lack of moral concern about the treatment of prisoners, but they can also generate a justification for the inhumane treatment, as demonstrated above by Smith. Recognizing how dehumanization can generate this moral response is important for working to change societal attitudes towards the proper treatment of people subject to carceral spaces. We must also understand what contributes to dehumanization to target these elements and eradicate their harm.

Haney (2008) discusses the impact of demonization on those who are incarcerated in supermax facilities (the maximum-security level for a prison facility). He explains that we tend to frame supermax prisoners as the "worst of the worst," the most dangerous among us. With this frame, the punishment system can justify keeping this dangerous population in control by whatever means necessary.

> The "worst of the worst" designation defines the inhabitants of supermax as fundamentally "other" and dehumanizes, degrades, and demonizes them as essentially different, even from other prisoners. It provides an immediate, intuitive, and unassailable rationale for the added punishment, extraordinary control, and severe deprivation that prevail in supermax. (p. 963)

He adds that this dehumanizing label of the "worst of the worst" can fuel mistreatment by guards. Their reputation as so-called hardened criminals can foster the false belief "that they are somehow impervious to the pains of imprisonment." (Haney, 2008, p. 963) This is an example of Smith's argument that assigning superhuman traits to dehumanized populations plays a role in demonization. Haney notes that contrary to being immune to the pain of imprisonment, many

incarcerated people experience significant trauma prior to incarceration that can leave them *more* vulnerable to the pains of incarceration. This connects to Smith's point about the cruel irony of the most vulnerable among us being the most likely to be dehumanized and framed as threatening.

In some cases, dehumanization leads to demonization which generates a moral imperative to do harm to demonized others, rather than merely turning off our moral concern for their well-being. When we view a population or person as demonized, or monstrous to use Smith's language, we feel justified in doing what it takes to reduce the threat of that population. This is especially clear in the case of dehumanized incarcerated populations: they are demonized as they are labeled as criminal, and the justification for seeing them as a threat is baked into the concept of criminality. This dehumanization and demonization of the incarcerated does more than subdue our moral concern for this population: it generates a justification for harming this population which is seen as dangerous or threatening. This is foundational to the current US criminal justice system and renders any changes to this system very difficult. Any data or reports about prisoner abuse and mistreatment will not induce moral outrage to create change if the dehumanization of incarcerated people is ongoing. As aesthetic harm plays a role in dehumanization, it also plays a role in demonization.

Dehumanization as Punishment

The United States prison system makes dehumanization a part of the punishment (Subramanian, 2021), and aesthetic matters ranging from restrictions on aesthetic agency to egregious aesthetic conditions are a part of this dehumanization and punishment.

> Contrast this with the U.S. corrections system, where penal life and settings are ordered around the paramount goals of "custody and order." American prison life is built upon

> the dehumanizing rituals of induction, initiation, hierarchy, degradation and routine, all designed to assert authority and control over the bodies and lives of incarcerated people. Individuality is stripped away upon prison entry, replaced by an inmate number and a standardized, nondescript uniform. (Subramanian, 2021)

While I believe that improved aesthetic conditions in prison would be beneficial for reducing aesthetic harm as well as dehumanization through signaling more care for the well-being of the incarcerated, providing softer blankets and tastier food would not be sufficient for addressing the harm of severely restricted aesthetic agency in carceral spaces. Ultimately, I see aesthetic agency as a critical component of well-being and living with dignity. In cross-cultural analyses such as this one which compare US prisons to those which are considered the most humane in the world, we see that common features of these more humane prisons include advanced aesthetic agency for subjects within them.

Halden Prison, located in southeastern Norway, exhibits better aesthetic conditions for prisoners on two fronts. First, the building itself has an open floor plan with private rooms for prisoners, is well-lit and bright with many windows providing natural light, and has access to a significant number of green spaces which prisoners can access and enjoy. Already, these environmental aesthetic conditions are superior to those of American jails and prisons, which frequently have overcrowded cells, very few windows, and very little outdoor space let alone "green" space. But perhaps even more importantly for the well-being of the incarcerated, Halden Prison also believes that personal agency should be protected for prisoners during their stay.

> They are encouraged to maintain a healthy measure of autonomy and personal agency in organizing their daily lives — they cook their own meals and are provided with an array of vocational training and educational programs, as well as various treatment options.

> They are given ample opportunities to maintain contact with family and friends, and they can all earn the award of brief periods of temporary leave from prison. (Subramanian, 2021)

While they do not discuss this approach to agency as having an aesthetic bent, the examples of activities which the prisoners are allowed to participate in are related to aesthetic agency. The incarcerated at Halden can cook their own food, with access to adequately stocked kitchens. Preparing one's own meals can be an important expression of aesthetic agency, as will be discussed further in Chapters III and IV. Halden also has a recording studio (dubbed "Criminal Records") for producing music or radio programming. These activities provide opportunities for aesthetic expression with significantly less severe sanctions on aesthetic agency than we find in jails and prisons across the US.

There are many examples of the use of aesthetic punishment in the US jail and prison context. These include practices of aesthetic harm in carceral spaces such as playing loud music over a sustained period as a form of torture. In other cases, aesthetic choices may not be made explicitly to punish but they have a sort of implicit punitive element to them. For example, the linens and clothing provided to prisoners are thin, scratchy, and made from low quality material and typically exist in only a few colorways: dull beiges with one or two color options that signify one's status within the prison (e.g., orange jumpsuits can be used to signify newcomers to a particular unit or institution). It's likely that these low-quality linens are chosen based on their low cost to the institutions, yet there's still something to consider about the way this decision feeds into punishment. What does it mean for an institution which forcibly houses people to make choices based on spending the least amount of money, without regard for satisfying use experience? When people are not incarcerated, they typically choose clothing that satisfies

certain aesthetic preferences: a material that feels good on their skin, colors that reflect their own preferences in hue, styles that reflect their personal style. It is harmful to lose the sartorial agency which allows you to express yourself through your clothing or wear clothing which feels good to you. Further, the fact that the people who clothe you prioritize their profits and savings over your wellbeing communicates a further harm, beyond the harm of being subjected to the scratchy, ill-fitting, and dull clothing itself. The scratchy clothes not chosen by you or with your satisfaction in mind are a reminder that your preferences and comfort, your life altogether, are less valued in this place.

As we have seen, aesthetic harm in the context of incarceration takes many forms. Prisoners are deprived of satisfying aesthetic experiences because they are subjected to the sterile, bland, and hostile environment of prisons. They also deal with severely limited access to nature and the outdoors and are forced to stay within the same area for long periods of time, restricting their ability to have satisfying aesthetic experiences. Their aesthetic agency is diminished because they are deprived of the ability to choose their own foods, decorate their personal spaces, make their own sartorial choices, etc. This reduction in aesthetic agency contributes to the dehumanizing effect of aesthetic harm. We can also see the aesthetic harm present in incarceration as a sign of dehumanization which has already been established towards those who are criminalized. Incarcerated people often highlight their sensory deprivation as a particularly salient aspect of the harshness of prison life.

While most if not all jails and prisons share commonalities in their negative aesthetic conditions, living on death row or being held in solitary confinement often involves especially acute aesthetic harm. In an article about California governor Gavin Newsom's decision to start moving death row prisoners at San Quentin into general population, several death row prisoners

are quoted about the experience of prison on death row and their experience since being moved off death row. They make very clear remarks about the sensory and aesthetic conditions of death row versus being housed in general population. One of the men who was transferred in July 2021, Ramon Rogers, was on death row in isolation for 23 hours a day with no access to the outdoors for the last 24 years before his transfer to a lower security prison. (Levin, 2023) Upon arriving at the new facility, Ramon stood on the grass for the first time in decades. He said the following about that moment: "We just marveled at the softness and the smell of the grass and the earth. It was remarkable. The officer let us stand there and watch as we left our footprints in the grass. It's just an amazing thing that people take for granted." (Levin, 2023) Being deprived of any time in nature for so long has increased Ramon's capacity for aesthetic appreciation of the grass under his feet.

Another transferred inmate, Correll Thomas, who had spent 22 years on death row, said he experienced "sensory overload" when he was transferred off death row.

> On the yard, it's just movement – people running laps at different speeds, people doing push-ups and exercising, someone's throwing a football back and forth, people playing soccer while others are playing football. I was keeping my head on a swivel, trying to take in as much as I can, turning right to left every two seconds. On death row, we don't have such fast movements. (Levin, 2023)

After decades of sensory deprivation in the isolation of death row where cells are smaller, time outside of the cell is severely constrained, and access to the outdoors ranges from extremely rare to nonexistent, Rogers and Thomas both speak to the sensory overwhelm of experiencing the outdoors for the first time. For Rogers, his remarks seem to indicate a positive aesthetic experience, while Thomas' indicates a more ambiguous response. It seems that he was certainly

overwhelmed and perhaps overstimulated by the new environment, but his remarks also suggest some enjoyment in taking it all in, having the opportunity to witness more life around him than usual.

While there may be some positive aspects of the move to lower security facilities for these men on death row, it is worth noting that they are still condemned to death. In addition to voicing excitement and trepidation around their new aesthetic conditions, they also speak to what has not changed and what is most fundamental to their well-being: their freedom. Jarvis Masters, who is fighting for his innocence while serving time on death row, illustrates this plainly when he expresses concern that the transfer would put him further away from his attorney and make it more difficult to work on his freedom. He says, "There's no place where I won't feel I'm on death row and innocent. You can put me in a place with a new basketball court or where I can wash my laundry or walk into a chow hall without shackles, but I'll still be thinking about my status. To say we're going to give prisoners a right to be without hand restraints – I feel like my whole life is in hand restraints." (Levin, 2023) Masters' quote addresses what is essential in this conversation about aesthetic harm and dehumanization as a function of agency. While recognizing harmful aesthetic conditions and their impact is critical for recognizing the harms of the prison system, giving incarcerated people better aesthetic conditions is not a sufficient solution to these harms. This does not mean that the reduction of aesthetic harms in prison is not a worthy goal, rather, that this goal does not adequately restore the aesthetic wellbeing of an individual. Improving the aesthetic conditions of prison through, for example, providing better food or access to the outdoors, does not address the aesthetic agency which is severely restricted in incarcerated individuals. The aesthetic conditions of the institution can improve while the ability for the incarcerated to participate in the construction of these aesthetic conditions remains

unchanged. In other words, more comfortable or pleasurable aesthetic conditions which are not the result of the incarcerated person's own choices or preferences do not restore aesthetic agency for the incarcerated, although they may certainly contribute to their aesthetic wellbeing. Improved aesthetic conditions may also signal a respect for the humanity of the incarcerated, reducing their dehumanization (both self-dehumanization and the dehumanization projected onto them by observers).

When imagining their freedom, incarcerated people often reference aesthetic experiences as events to look forward to. In the conclusion of this article, the interviewer says the following in reference to Keith Doolin's dreams for his freedom: "He fantasizes about having a meal at a dinner table with family, using real silverware and plates, and drinking water with ice cubes. He dreams of living in an area with lots of grass, trees and open terrain. And he looks forward to never again wearing the blue color of prison uniforms." (Levin, 2023) Doolin's vision for freedom is aesthetically rich. He imagines himself participating in aesthetic experiences which appeal to him and being able to share in these experiences with others, like his family. While this is just one article spanning a handful of incarcerated men's experiences with sensory deprivation, overload and fantasies for a life where they have freedom, I believe that many incarcerated people are also acutely aware of the impact of their aesthetic experiences on their lives in prison, because aesthetic harm is a major component of punishment in US prisons. Each type of aesthetic harm involves depriving people of the opportunity to participate in activities that are seen as distinctively human. Once incarcerated people are deprived of these human qualities, it is possible to view them as less than human.

Dehumanization has many roots: ideological and political messaging, dehumanizing language, media representation, and aesthetic harm in everyday aesthetic experiences or through

deprived aesthetic agency are all contributing factors to dehumanization. This chapter has explored aesthetic harm as it influences the lived experience of incarceration. There is a feedback loop occurring with aesthetic harm: prior exposure to aesthetic harms as a form of dehumanization increases the likelihood of continued exposure to mistreatment, both aesthetic harm and other types of harm. Thus, aesthetic harm, far from being a trivial issue compared to other problems faced by the incarcerated, can directly impact dehumanization and the mistreatment and abuses that are made easier to enact once prior dehumanization has occurred. Chapter III will consider examples of aesthetic harm and dehumanization in the carceral context. The chapter will consider the environmental aesthetic harms of incarceration as well as the harms facilitated by prison objects and their design.

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Chapter III. Application: Aesthetic Mechanisms of Dehumanization in Carceral Spaces

As discussed in chapter 1, humans have aesthetic needs which are integral to their wellbeing. These aesthetic needs include the capacity to express oneself aesthetically or engage in satisfying aesthetic experiences. Beyond having the aesthetic agency to engage in aesthetic practices, having a high degree of aesthetic agency is crucial for our ability to avoid or leave harmful aesthetic conditions. The more robust your aesthetic agency, the more options and opportunities you have for engaging in aesthetic practices that are valuable to you and avoiding prolonged exposure to aesthetic conditions that are harmful to you, or aesthetic harm. Aesthetic harm refers to ways in which aesthetic conditions and objects can have adverse effects on individuals' wellbeing. In some cases, restrictions on aesthetic agency or increased exposure to aesthetic harm may result from injustice.

In chapter II, I argued that aesthetic harm has a relationship with dehumanization. Aesthetic harm may be a form of dehumanization and it may also be a sign of dehumanization. Aesthetic harm as a form of dehumanization occurs when a person is subjected to aesthetically harmful objects or environments which contribute to their dehumanization. People with severe restrictions on their aesthetic agency (and agency generally) living in degrading conditions are sometimes judged by others with disgust or seen as inferior for living in this way, despite the limitations on their ability to shape the conditions that they live under. As a sign, aesthetic harm being inflicted on an individual or group may signal to us that the subject of this harm has already been dehumanized. We can recognize sustained aesthetic harm as a sign of prior dehumanization, especially when it is met with little moral outrage or backlash when examples of this mistreatment are made public.

In this chapter, I focus on the aesthetic harms produced by the carceral system in the United States as an example of unjust aesthetic harms which contribute to dehumanization. This dehumanization occurs at the personal and interpersonal level: it can target one's own perception of their humanity and it can target how others perceive them as more or less human. Dehumanization erodes the concern for treating the dehumanized with the dignity and protection that human life ought to receive. In some cases, such as the case of the incarcerated, a society may view a dehumanized population as deserving of particularly heinous circumstances. Often, the disgraceful and dehumanizing conditions of incarceration are seen as necessary for deterring crime (through making the conditions so abhorrent that no one would want to end up there), managing a dangerous population, and even reforming or rehabilitating an offender.[8] Increasingly, research suggests that incarceration is significantly less effective at deterrence than we assume it to be (National Institute of Justice, 2016) and that the harms of incarceration are not leading to safer conditions in carceral spaces or better outcomes for people reentering society after a sentence (aka reform or rehabilitation). In fact, there is research that suggests that harsh prison conditions contribute to reincarceration. "Research has suggested that the criminogenic effects of imprisonment may be exacerbated by the harshness of the prison experience; that is, that certain kinds of especially painful forms of imprisonment further increase the likelihood of reincarceration." (Haney, 2012, p. 15, citing Boxer, Middlemass, & Delorenzo, 2009; Chen & Shapiro, 2007; Lovell, Johnson, & Cain, 2007). Thus, we should not assume that harsher conditions of incarceration lead to safer conditions for the incarcerated nor for the general public.

[8] I say "even" because scholarship and public opinion generally agree that our current incarceration system is not successful in rehabilitation or reform, and the goal of incarceration centers instead of punishment, incapacitation and deterrence.

Further, we have reason to believe that these harmful conditions actually contribute to the prevalence of violence and crime.

Aesthetic mechanisms of dehumanization are aesthetic choices and practices that create and maintain dehumanization. This can take many forms. In carceral spaces, architecture and design choices around the built environment can involve aesthetic mechanisms of dehumanization. The design and regulation of objects used in carceral spaces can also be aesthetic mechanisms of dehumanization, neglecting the wellbeing of a targeted population or explicitly depriving them of satisfactory aesthetic experiences. These aesthetic mechanisms which promote dehumanization also involve aesthetic harm. In some cases, the aesthetic harm comes from product or object design which neglects the aesthetic experience or agency of the incarcerated. In other cases, aesthetic harm refers to aesthetic mechanisms of torture, such as music torture or sensory deprivation and overload. These two categories may intersect at times. The austere architecture of the prison with its bare concrete walls both neglects the aesthetic experience of the incarcerated with its lack of beauty or décor and contributes to an environment where sound reverberates loudly, amping up the severity of music torture or sensory overload from the sounds of the prison.

In this chapter, I examine the various implicit and explicit ways that carceral spaces and products designed for carceral spaces contribute to aesthetic harm and dehumanization. I consider the role of intentionality in determining whether aesthetic harm or aesthetic mechanisms of dehumanization are present. Do carceral institutions or those who manage them use aesthetic harm as a method of punishment, or is it just an inevitable consequence of cost-cutting approaches to mass incarceration? Does it matter? I review some historic examples of sensory deprivation, a type of aesthetic harm and mechanism of dehumanization, and architecture models

which were intended to influence the behavior of the incarcerated. These examples serve as explicit articulations of the power of aesthetic conditions over the behavior of the incarcerated. The discussion of these examples also calls into question the goals of incarceration: how aesthetic mechanisms are used to control behaviors in ways that are dehumanizing, even when these methods are thought to bring about positive change such as reform and productive labor. I then turn to contemporary examples of aesthetic harm and mechanisms of dehumanization in carceral spaces. These examples show the impact that the design of objects and environments has on aesthetic wellbeing and dehumanization. I focus on uniforms and food in the discussion of objects, with a brief discussion on a more trivial object that I argue contributes to aesthetic harm and dehumanization: a chess board. The discussion on environments invokes the considerations related to objects, their design and effects, since environments are of course in large part made up of designed objects. In my analysis of environments which utilize aesthetic mechanisms of dehumanization and harm, I offer a brief review of the literature on hostile architecture, callous objects, and music torture. Evaluating an environment as opposed to an object mostly involves focusing on the cumulative effects of aesthetically harmful objects, but it also includes considerations about architecture, the layout of a space, the way sound moves through a space, etc. Finally, I consider the cons of aesthetic harm and mechanisms of dehumanization as they measure up to the alleged pros of implementing some of these aesthetically harmful designs in carceral spaces. If it's true that designing objects to limit functionality can reduce weaponization or that utilizing architecture to maximize surveillance can improve criminal behavior, is it worth accepting that some aesthetic harm may be necessary for maintaining a safe and orderly carceral space? I suggest that we do not have sufficient evidence to motivate aesthetically harming people to make them behave better or less violently. There is evidence to the contrary, that aesthetic

harm, especially as it contributes to dehumanization, can negatively impact behaviors, wellbeing and successful reentry to society.

I make no assumptions that those who design prison goods are *intentionally* designing them to be dehumanizing out of malice. It is true that in many cases the motivation of the State which prioritizes its bottom line over human needs is responsible for producing a dehumanizing effect. For example, while it is not explicitly stated that prison food should be less appetizing to contribute to one's punishment, being forcibly subjected to an institution that benefits from spending as little as possible on you has the effect of being forced to eat low quality food. State spending on food for the incarcerated varies, but a 2020 report found that the majority of states spend less than $3 a day on food for each prisoner, with several states spending less than $2 and the lowest budget being $1.02 a day on food, per person. (Soble et al., 2020)

Further, prisons and prison goods are designed with the wellbeing of the correctional officers in mind, often at the expense of the wellbeing of the incarcerated. Prison goods are frequently designed to reduce the possibility of weaponization. While this may seem like a worthy goal with potential benefits to everyone in these carceral spaces, including the incarcerated, I argue that this approach to reducing violence in jails and prisons does not target the root of the violence and is thus not effective enough to warrant the aesthetic harms that come with these objects. In both cases, the needs and experience of the incarcerated are such low priorities that in many cases, very few if any of their needs, including aesthetic needs, are being fully met and the conditions of these spaces are intolerable and inhumane.

While there may not be an explicitly stated policy to punish through aesthetic harm in our US jails and prisons, the prevalence of aesthetic harm in carceral spaces alongside the reactions from the public to reports of these harms suggest a mindset inhabited by some people in the US

that punishment is the foremost goal of incarceration. Many believe that the incarcerated have done something to deserve their dehumanization, the stripping of their agency and ability to have their needs met, and this enables the continued practices of harm, aesthetic and otherwise, against the incarcerated. We can witness examples of this attitude towards the incarcerated on social media in response to headlines which report on abhorrent jail and prison conditions, such as the example explored below.

In September 2022, Lashawn Thompson died while in custody of Fulton County jail in Atlanta, Georgia. The Fulton County jail is well known for its abysmal conditions.[9] Mr. Thompson's story made headlines due to the horrific conditions of his death. One headline from Fox News reads, "Georgia inmate eaten alive by bugs in conditions 'not fit for a deceased animal,' family attorney says: Fulton County Jail officials allegedly noticed Thompson's deterioration but did nothing to stop it before he died." An autopsy determined the cause of death as a combination of factors including "untreated decompensated schizophrenia" alongside "dehydration, malnutrition and severe body insect infestation, which included lice and bed bugs" as significant contributing conditions of his death.[10] This case clearly involves significant harms that go beyond just aesthetic harms. I discuss this case to explore reactions to inhumane carceral conditions which suggest a severe lack of moral concern and sometimes a desire for inhumane conditions to be a part of punishment for the incarcerated, not as an example of aesthetic harm.

While I recognize that the following quotes from commenters only represent a small sample size of people responding egregiously to reported harms against the incarcerated, I

[9] The Department of Justice opened a civil investigation of Fulton County Jail in July 2023 due to "credible allegations that an incarcerated person died covered in insects and filth, that the Fulton County Jail is structurally unsafe, that prevalent violence has resulted in serious injuries and homicides, and that officers are being prosecuted for using excessive force." (Office of Public Affairs, 2023, press release)

[10] The attention that this case brought helped the family win a settlement in response to his death being ruled as a homicide, but it's important to note that not all cases of abuse and neglect inside jails and prisons receive this level attention nor this outcome.

believe that these responses offer insight to views held by too many people in the United States around the proper care and treatment of the incarcerated. Among the Twitter (X) comments from Fox News reporting on this incident, several responses are worth highlighting. Some replies imply that these conditions are appropriate for a jail or prison: “It’s jail, not the Hilton.” “It’s not the Grand Hyatt Regency. It’s there to make you think twice about coming back!” “It's jail/prison... Not a Hilton.” Several other responders focus on shifting the blame for these conditions to the person who was confined within them: “That cell looks self-induced.” “Many inmates destroy their cells. They flood the cell, wipe their own feces all over the wall and themselves. All for attempts at movement or to inconvenience staff!” Another genre of comments focuses on what I call the “do not do the crime if you cannot do the time” mentality. “Hmmm maybe you shouldn’t commit crimes that would send you to this kind of place.” “The point of incarceration is to provide a deterrent, it’s not camp, if you don’t want to get eaten alive by bugs I might suggest to not rob that gas station.” “Oh well no tears shed here. Stay out of jail.” (Fox News, 2023) These replies are not an anomaly; they represent real and dehumanizing attitudes towards the incarcerated that persist in our society.

Given this mindset, it seems plausible that some cases of aesthetic harm in carceral spaces are the result not simply of negligence, but of this belief that incarcerated people should be and deserve to be dehumanized and treated in ways which deny their basic human dignity and needs, including aesthetic needs. Historically, sensory deprivation and aesthetic conditions which promote surveillance have been advocated for in the design of prisons with explicit intentions to control the behavior of the incarcerated alongside beliefs that these conditions would promote rehabilitation towards different ends. This rhetoric which surrounds the creation of the

penitentiary resonates through our carceral system in the US today with some important shifts in the stated intended outcomes for implementing these models of incarceration.

History of Aesthetic Mechanisms of Dehumanization

Aesthetic mechanisms of dehumanization have been adopted explicitly as mechanisms of controlling the behavior of the incarcerated for centuries. The history of the modern prison system in the US reveals this connection to the role of aesthetics in incarceration through the reformist's view on the role of sensory deprivation. Imprisonment had previously been used only to hold people until their moment of corporal punishment or execution came. The prison itself was the product of a reformist movement to improve punishment. In *Are Prisons Obsolete?* Angela Davis examines this history of the penitentiary, with its conditions of isolation and sensory deprivation, as the product of a reformist movement to argue that prison reform should not be considered inherently positive or progressive. The language of prison reform often has a positive connotation today, presented on its surface as a method of improving the conditions of incarceration, an ostensibly worthy goal. Underlying the goals of reform, though, are the motivations and ideologies of the reformers. To what ends do they seek to improve the prison conditions, and how do they determine and measure the success of these reformed conditions?

Reformers believed that imprisonment would serve both to punish and to reform those who committed crimes. Davis considers reformist John Howard's writing and political impact on the use of imprisonment itself for punishment. Howard, a Protestant whose religious beliefs informed his ideas about penal reform, wrote in his 1777 book *The State of Prisons* that imprisonment gives the imprisoned an opportunity for "religious self-reflection and self-reform." (Davis, 2003, p. 46) Howard believed that conditions of total isolation and sensory deprivation would allow people to become reformed in the absence of the distractions of daily life, which he

believed led people to sin. The importance of prison architecture which promoted sensory deprivation was invoked frequently at this time as a way of modeling monastic life where individuals renounce worldly pursuits to strengthen their spirituality. (Davis, 2003, p. 48) While reformers like Howard were explicit in their advocacy of isolation and conditions of sensory deprivation, they did not intend for this deprivation to be implemented as punishment. Rather, they believed these were most likely to lead to a person's reformation, a reformation which was religious in nature. According to Davis, "John Howard's ideas were incorporated in the Penitentiary Act of 1799, which opened the way for the modern prison." (Davis, 2003, p. 46) Even though Howard and other advocates of sensory deprivation saw these practices as helpful rather than harmful to the incarcerated, Davis notes that it was immediately clear to at least some people at the time that sensory deprivation had horrific effects on people's wellbeing. Davis includes the following quote from Charles Dickens' writing about his visit to Eastern Penitentiary in 1842:

> I hold this slow and daily tampering with the mysteries of the brain to be immeasurably worse than any torture of the body… 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. (Dickens, 1900, p. 119-20, as cited by Davis, 2003, p. 48)

Dickens' description of the harms of solitary confinement, which include sensory deprivation among other harms such as extreme isolation, speaks to a concern of mine in the importance of recognizing aesthetic harm as a serious form of harm. Though we may initially consider physical harm to be the most serious type of torment, aesthetic mechanisms of harm can be just as painful to experience and, in some cases, may pose a special risk through our

unwillingness or inability to consider these harms as serious harms. Aesthetic mechanisms of harms in solitary confinement are enforced through an environment that severely restricts sensory as well as creative engagements.

Solitary Confinement and Aesthetic Elements of Punishment

Davis points out the irony in envisioning solitary confinement as a method for shifting away from punishment and into reform. Today, we know that solitary confinement is not only a severe form of punishment, but can also amount to a form of torture. Contemporary carceral studies scholars argue that the use of solitary confinement and sensory deprivation today is not even ostensibly about reform or self-improvement, but strictly about control. In Davis's examination of the proliferation of super-max prisons in the US, she notes that supermaxes are justified by the insistence that the level of control and deprivation utilized in supermax is necessary for controlling a population who are considered monstrous.

> No one - not even the most ardent defenders of the supermax - would try to argue today that absolute segregation, including sensory deprivation, is restorative and healing. The prevailing justification for the supermax is that the horrors it creates are the perfect complement for the horrifying personalities deemed the worst of the worst by the prison system. In other words, there is no pretense that rights are respected, there is no concern for the individual, there is no sense that men and women incarcerated in supermaxes deserve anything approaching respect and comfort. (Davis, 2003, p. 50-51)

It's noteworthy that even advocates of extreme conditions of isolation and sensory deprivation do not appeal to any sort of healing benefits to the prisoners subjected to these conditions. This is a shift in the rhetoric around solitary confinement and appropriate conditions for punishment, from ostensibly being about rehabilitation to explicitly being about control. Philosopher Lisa

Guenther has written extensively on solitary confinement and says the following about this rhetorical shift: “Gone is the rhetoric of rehabilitation or spiritual redemption. It has been replaced by a neoliberal language of risk management, security, efficiency, accountability, and public-private partnerships.” (Guenther, 2013. p.161) It is understandable that these values of security and risk management are considered important, since jails and prisons in the United States are in fact rife with violence. (Wolff & Shi, 2009; Carson, 2021; Taylor et al., 2013)

However, this justification for solitary confinement and conditions of sensory deprivation is inadequate because of what we know about the harms of solitary confinement. Through the testimony of solitary confinement survivors and a growing body of research on the effects of these conditions, we know that conditions of isolation and sensory deprivation cause severe harms to the psychological health and wellbeing of those subjected to them. Tamms Year Ten was a grassroots movement which spent 10 years working to shut down Tamms Correctional Center, a supermax facility which subjected prisoners to extreme and constant solitary confinement and sensory deprivation. The coalition describes the devastating effects of these conditions: “Prisoners are known to cut or mutilate themselves, scream uncontrollably, smear themselves with feces, and attempt suicide—all predictable consequences of the torture of sensory deprivation.” (Fleetwood, 2020, p. 225) It is significant that studies on the high prevalence of suicide in US jails and prisons frequently identify sensory deprivation as a contributing factor to suicide. (James & Vanko, 2021; LeMasters et al., 2023)

Thus, the emphasis on maintaining control and order over any concern for the comfort or dignity of the incarcerated is not only wrong because of the harms it contributes to, it is also ineffective for improving the conditions of incarceration towards reform, rehabilitation, or improved success in re-entry. Sensory deprivation is not proven to effectively reduce violence or

harm in the first place, and a growing body of evidence suggests that it contributes to more violence and harm overall. The Tamms Year Ten collective discusses this research as an important impetus for their organizing work: "Research has shown that supermax prisons don't reduce prison violence or rehabilitate prisoners. On the contrary, isolation induces or exacerbates mental illness, creates stress and tension, worsens behavior, and undermines the ability of people to function once they get out." (Reynolds & Eisenman, 2013)

These historic and contemporary references to aesthetic elements of incarceration show how aesthetic mechanisms have long played a role in the experience of incarceration, whether we recognize its power or not. While the extreme consequences of sensory deprivation and, to a lesser extent, sensory overload have been given attention as a major contributing factor of harm in the prison system, more seemingly mundane or trivial details of the everyday aesthetic life of the incarcerated have received less attention and contribute to this environment of aesthetic harm as well as general harm to wellbeing. I turn now to a discussion of the aesthetic harm caused by objects in carceral spaces, followed by a discussion of the aesthetic harm present in the environments of incarceration.

Everyday Aesthetic Harms in Carceral Spaces

In this section, I offer two examples in which incarcerated people's aesthetic agency is severely restricted, resulting in harm. Uniforms represent a severe lack of sartorial autonomy, and mealtimes in carceral spaces reveal severe restrictions in aesthetic agency and a deep lack of concern for the aesthetic experience of food. The inability to participate in choosing your own clothes or cooking your own food prevents the incarcerated from engaging in these aesthetic practices, and the low-quality clothing and food provided to them also contributes to an unpleasant and harmful aesthetic experience. These are both elements of aesthetic harm.

The prison uniform provides an example of aesthetic harm as a form of dehumanization. Prison uniforms override one's sartorial autonomy and mark the incarcerated with a number, stripping away their aesthetic agency as well as their individuality. Denial of agency and individuality are both conditions of dehumanization, and prison uniforms enact each of these conditions. When you are forced to wear a uniform that serves to catalogue you as an inmate, you are deprived of your choice to wear clothes that, among other things, may express your personality. In addition to the reduced aesthetic agency concern, prison uniforms are typically uncomfortable and poorly made, leading to an unsatisfying or negative aesthetic experience. The prison uniform example shows how both types of aesthetic harm may work together.

As discussed in chapter I, whether a restriction of aesthetic agency or exposure to unpleasant aesthetic conditions rises to the level of harm depends on the context. Both the aesthetic needs of the individual and the circumstances of their restriction and/or exposure are relevant to determining whether there is an aesthetic harm and what the severity of that aesthetic harm is. Uniforms provide an example of this contextual element. Uniforms do not always contribute to a harmful aesthetic experience, even though they do always impose some degree of restriction on sartorial autonomy and may also be uncomfortable to the wearer in some cases. Uniforms that designate membership to a team, such as a sports team, can signal a valued identity and inclusion in a community. In this context, a uniform may be worn with pride despite the limitations that it places on one's sartorial agency. By contrast, a prison uniform is worn in the context of isolation from one's community and relegates one to a lower status in society, rather than an elevated one. In some cases, whether a uniform is considered aesthetically pleasing or harmful may depend on the wearer themselves. Military uniforms are seen by some

wearers as representing a team membership that they are proud of.[11] For others, military uniforms may represent an institution that they are not or no longer proud to represent.[12] Thus, the uniform is an interesting site for exploring the multifaceted ways that assigned clothing can affect a wearer's wellbeing and esteem.

Of course, there are many differences between wearing a prison uniform and other types of uniforms. First, a prison uniform is the only option for the incarcerated; thus the amount of time spent in the uniform is greater as is the severity of their restricted aesthetic agency in dressing themselves. A prison uniform, far from designating a sense of pride or belonging like a team uniform may, marks the wearer as a criminal. Further, many institutions use different colored jumpsuits to designate the threat level of the wearer. While the specifics of this practice vary from institution to institution, different color uniforms are often used to represent different status within the prison (new transfer, high risk, etc.). The Court Services Division Manual for the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department charts proper jumpsuit color coding for inmates in their county. At Men's Central Jail dark blue uniforms are worn by those in general population, orange jumpsuits designate homosexuality, and red jumpsuits are used for juveniles. (Los Angeles Sheriff's Department, n.d.) At other institutions, different color uniforms may represent disciplinary infractions, death row status, work status, and more.

Former Maricopa County, Arizona, Sheriff Joe Arpaio was notorious for his use of clothing as punishment. He made inmates in his jurisdiction wear bright pink underwear and use pink sheets and towels. (Mettler, 2017) According to Joe's Pink Shorts, Arpaio's website selling

[11] The US Military is clear about the significance of their uniforming practices: "Our uniforms embody the professionalism and commitment to the Army Values - loyalty, duty, respect, selfless service, honor, integrity and personal courage. The uniform is a symbol of honor and tradition, of esprit de corps and morale, and of personal excellence and pride." (US Army, n.d.)

[12] I'm thinking about being drafted, but also people who come to oppose the US military during their service, a recent highly publicized example of this being Aaron Bushnell who self-immolated in fatigues to oppose US compliance in Palestinian genocide. (Williams, 2024)

pink shorts resembling the ones he forced prisoners to wear, "The use of pink underwear (and other pink items) for inmates at Tent City was intended to prevent theft and as a form of humiliation to deter inmates from coming back to jail."[13] In a video he shared to Facebook, he adds to this list of reasons: "The other reason is, they hate pink! Why would you give them a color that they like?" (SBS Viceland, 2022) Arpaio sells the shorts to fundraise in support of law enforcement. Proceeds go to America's Sheriff, a non-profit which "defends the cops in legal battles being wrongfully terminated and persecuted for political reasons." (Fountain Hill Times Independent, 2022) Interestingly, there have been allegations of Arpaio selling the pink shorts that he assigned to inmates since at least 1999. (Lukinbeal & Sharp, 2015)[14] Arpaio's belief that harsh and humiliating conditions are necessary to deter crime reflects the "tough on crime" mentality that many Americans have. He once referred to one of his most notorious facilities, commonly referred to as "tent city," as a concentration camp. This facility exposed people to extreme heat and other unfavorable weather conditions like rain without proper shelter, conditions which are harmful to health and safety but also aesthetically harmful. When asked about his use of the term 'concentration camp' to refer to one of his facilities, he insisted that he was joking yet he also said: "But even if it was a concentration camp, what difference does it make? I still survived. I still kept getting re-elected." (Fernández, 2017) This speaks to the dangerous level of power and discretion given to prison officials to enact punishment by whatever means necessary. It is taken for granted that harsh and degrading conditions would deter people from committing the crimes that lead them to incarceration, but there is not adequate evidence to support this claim. There is, as I have discussed here, a growing body of

[13] *The Story of Joe's Pink Shorts.* (n.d.) Joe's Pink Shorts. https://joespinkshorts.com/product/joes-pink-shorts/
[14] Arpaio denied that his sheriff's office was affiliated with the sale of the pink prison shorts issues by the state, but his volunteer posse was selling shorts at this time.

evidence that these harmful conditions do more harm than good when it comes to reducing violence and crime in our society.

In addition to the use of uniforms to index and punish the incarcerated, the design considerations of uniforms themselves offer insight into the exclusion of care for the incarcerated. As evidenced by the examples below, prison goods manufacturers are clearly unconcerned with how a prison uniform feels to wear, in terms of both the literal sensory input and the emotional and psychological impact of the loss of individuality and expression through clothing. They are most concerned with designing uniforms which meet the needs of the institution and those who run it.

Prison uniforms serve a clear practical function from the perspective of those running a carceral institution. There is a need to provide clothing for large populations of people that is durable, cost-effective, and differentiates inmates in ways that are beneficial to guards. On the other hand, the features that make them functional for prison personnel can be unpleasant for the wearers of these uniforms. Bob Barker Company, one of the largest manufacturers of prison goods in the United States, advertises their prison uniform design as offering many benefits to prison guards. Their jumpsuit uniform has a plastic zipper designed to avoid unnecessarily setting off a metal detector. They also advertise that the jumpsuit has minimal hardware which "makes contraband inspection easier with no metal snaps."[15] Other uniforms provided by Bob Barker Company have no zipper at all. The "Bob Barker High Security Hook and Loop Closure Jumpsuit" is advertised as a uniform which has been designed to "reduce your security risks with this Hook and Loop closure style."[16] Uniforms are also constructed to hold up to harsh

[15] Bob Barker Company. (n.d.). *Zippered Jumpsuit, Solid Colors*. https://www.bobbarker.com/zippered-jumpsuit-solid-colors?page=1

[16] Bob Barker Company. (n.d.). *Zippered Jumpsuit, Bob Barker® High Security Hook and Loop Closure Jumpsuit, Orange*. https://www.bobbarker.com/bob-barker-high-security-hook-and-loop-closure-jumpsuit-orange

laundering in industrial washing machines, meaning that the fabrics used are valued for their toughness and durability, rather than their softness or comfort on the body. The approach to design for prison goods by Bob Barker always centers the experience of the guard, often at the expense of the experience of the prisoner. This is an example of aesthetic harm as a sign of dehumanization. The needs of the wearer do not enter the advertising or design considerations of these uniforms: they are treated as objects more than subjects. It is taken for granted that protection *from* prisoners should be the primary consideration when designing prison goods, not the needs (aesthetic and otherwise) of the prisoners.

Bob Barker also provides prisons with uniforms for guards, and the contrast in the marketing of guard uniforms versus prisoner uniforms is interesting. These product descriptions are written to make the uniform choice sound appealing, in terms of comfort and even fit and style, to the wearer. The description for a guard's polo reads: "Designed for a woman's torso, curved and tapered just where it needs to be. No more baggy or constricting spots. With narrower shoulders, a roomier chest, and slimmer sleeves, this polo keeps you moving freely and comfortably as you work."[17] The guards wear these uniforms for less of their overall lives than the incarcerated wear theirs, yet their comfort, attention to fit, and stylishness are considered and appealed to in the design and advertising of this product. As discussed above, the differences in the context of the officer's versus the prisoner's uniform are also relevant to the experience of wearing each uniform. These examples from Bob Barker Company demonstrate another level of dehumanization at work. The way the needs of prisoners are left out of design considerations and the way prisoners lose their choice in what they wear point to their reduced aesthetic agency. This connects back to my chapter II discussion of aesthetic harm as the inverse of Saito's

[17] Bob Barker Company. (n.d.). *First Tactical® Women's Performance Polo Short Sleeve.* https://www.bobbarker.com/first-tactical-womens-performance-polo-short-sleeve?page=1

concept of respect for others and their wellbeing, expressed aesthetically. The design of prison goods which seeks to control incarcerated populations at the expense of considering their aesthetic needs produces aesthetic harm, which is an aesthetic expression of disregard for their wellbeing. The harms go beyond the negative sensory experience produced by prison uniforms and the severe restriction in sartorial agency that they represent. The design of prison uniforms also conveys a message about how we view the incarcerated: as a threatening population which cannot be trusted to not misuse zippers or toothbrushes for violence. As I discuss later, the compounding effects of prison goods designed to control and manage prisoners work together to create an environment of harm more severe than any one of these examples in isolation.

The food served in carceral institutions is another major source of aesthetic harm. Food is of course required for our survival, but many aesthetic practices around food have meaning beyond this physical survival need. Carceral conditions severely limit aesthetic agency around mealtime. Prisoners in the US are not permitted to cook their own food (though illicit workarounds are discussed in chapter IV) or to choose what they want to eat and when, and are severely limited in who they can share meals with or how they can use food to celebrate religious or culturally significant occasions. These aesthetic components of mealtimes relate to our aesthetic needs, and in the absence of the ability to engage with these practices, we can experience aesthetic harm.

Food in prison, like many other conditions of incarceration, varies greatly among institutions while having some underlying consistencies across the board. In the United States, that underlying consistency is that food in jails and prisons is almost always made of low-quality ingredients that can feed large numbers of people as cheaply as possible. This set up does not lead to particularly ideal mealtime conditions. In jails and prisons in the US, even the status of

providing enough food for survival is in jeopardy. Many prisons have shifted from 3 meals a day to 2, sometimes even to 1. (Vick, 2024b) Private prison food companies increasingly push the limits of adequate nutrition by artificially fortifying dehydrated foods which technically meet nutritional standards while not resembling actual foods. (Vick, 2024b)

Why care about the aesthetic conditions of mealtime when not even the nutritional requirements of mealtime are being met? As discussed in chapter I, there are circumstances where people experiencing partially unmet survival needs may have more control in meeting other needs such as aesthetic needs. While the incarcerated cannot themselves improve the nutritional quality of food on the inside, they do find creative ways to engage in aesthetic practices of making and sharing food with others to satisfy partially their aesthetic needs. These aesthetic practices around food are not sanctioned by the institution and are explicitly outlined as a punishable offense in state and federal Department of Corrections handbooks.

The legal guidelines around food in prison mostly relate to the bare minimum nutrition requirements that must be provided by the State to inmates. Incarcerated folks also receive handbooks that instruct them to interact with food only in particular ways. The rules focus on the limitations on permissible food consumption and the requirements of the State to provide food, with no explicit reference to the quality of the food in terms of the aesthetic value. For example, a handbook written by the Department of Corrections for inmates in public prisons outlines the right to food in the following way:

Right: You have the right to be provided healthy and nutritious food.

> Responsibility: You have the responsibility to eat healthy and not abuse or waste food or drink.[18]

The vagueness of these guidelines, as well as what is left out, plays into this mechanism of control by allowing for a wide range of interpretation in implementation. What is the State's idea of abusing or wasting food? Could it be remixing ingredients from the cafeteria to create one's own meals? Absolutely. However, unsanctioned cooking is quite popular in carceral spaces across the US. There is a tension between its popularity and its ultimate impermissibility: officers have the power of discretion to determine when to punish and when to look the other way when inmates "play with food." Additionally, incarcerated people frequently use food for purposes other than creating different meals. Incarcerated artists frequently use food to create art: Skittles in water makes a pigment to paint, dried chicken bones make for decent sketching tools, coffee grounds add texture and their own stain, etc. The aesthetic is used as a mechanism of control in these contexts because people are deprived of satisfying aesthetic experiences *and* aesthetic agency under these circumstances. This deprivation is harmful enough to their wellbeing that they are compelled to find ways to regain access to satisfying aesthetic experiences and aesthetic agency through practices that are risky to engage in within the carceral setting, as I will discuss further in chapter IV. After discussing a sample of prison goods which can contribute to aesthetic harm and dehumanization, I turn to the aesthetic harms enacted through the design of our environments.

Aesthetic Harm in Carceral Environments

[18] This is an excerpt from the Code of Federal Regulations produced by the Federal Register for federal prisons in the United States. Accessed from: https://www.govinfo.gov/app/details/CFR-2003-title28-vol2/CFR-2003-title28-vol2-sec541-12

As discussed earlier, architecture has long played a role in the design and intended function of the prison. This section explores how architecture, as well as other design elements of the places and spaces which we inhabit, influences our wellbeing, and has the potential to generate aesthetic harm. Because environments are also made up of the objects within them, this discussion will have some overlap with the discussion of aesthetic harm enacted by objects above. I review some of the literature on concepts like "hostile architecture" and "callous objects" which aim to trace the ways that design is used to convey and enact hostility towards a certain population. I then consider the impact of these designs as they are used outside of prisons as well as within them.

Hostile architecture is a term used to capture a form of social control used to deter people from certain behaviors. There are many examples of objects that have been designed and redesigned with behavioral deterrence in mind: benches with partitions that prevent their use for sleeping, trash cans with bars to prevent people from discarding large trash and/or sifting through the trash, etc. There are also unpleasant design choices related not to a particular object but to a space. For example, the convenience store chain 7-Eleven in the United States uses very loud classical music to deter loitering outside of their stores. (This is discussed further below.)

Robert Rosenberger writes about these phenomena in his book *Callous Objects: Designs against the Homeless.* He integrates theory from philosophy of technology with theory about design to demonstrate how design is used to harm homeless folks. I want to adapt his framework to the context of incarcerated folks and the design tactics used in carceral spaces.

He starts out the book with the following account of callousness as it can be assigned to material things:

> We must think about what it could mean for a material "thing" to fall under political critique and even be criticized as callous. On one hand, of course, a device like a park or subway bench is simply an inert object, certainly not something with a mind or intentions, and thus obviously not among the category of things we would normally call "guilty" for any reason, let alone callous or cruel. But on the other hand, we must develop a way to understand objects like the bench as capable of participating in large-scale collective ends. It is crucial that we understand them to be things open to certain uses, closed to others, and amenable to concrete alteration by different social forces advancing different political objectives. (Rosenberger, 2017, Introduction section, para. 7)

On this account we can understand material things as not always being morally neutral: they can have negative or positive social impact depending on design considerations.

The primary function of an object is often the purpose for which the device has been designed and manufactured. For example, Skittles are a candy designed as a sweet treat. In prisons, Skittles are provided by commissary and have the primary function of providing additional calories to inmates. Their design to be a sweet treat for consumption does not prevent them from also being available for use as a source of pigments for creating art or a type of currency used to get access to other goods. Of course, there are still limits to the available function for any given material object. A Skittle cannot be used as a device to open cans.

This framework is helpful for articulating the ways that prison design fits into larger political agendas and how things could be otherwise. Design often treats incarcerated people as if they themselves are the problem instead of addressing the underlying problems: why is there so much violence and suicide in prison? Why are people desperate to use objects for things other than their sanctioned purpose? Rosenberger observes: "When behaviors essential to an unhoused

person's mere existence constitute the grounds for arrest, then homelessness itself has been made a crime." (Rosenberger, 2017, Politics section, para. 4) Similarly, means for survival are criminalized in carceral settings, layering punishments within punishments. Often in carceral settings, explicit attention is given to limiting the function(s) of an object to the primary function only, i.e. the function that is developed with the interests of non-inmates in mind. In the outside world, we can see how everyday objects are designed to promote a primary function while limiting, to varying degrees, the alternative functions available to an object. New iterations of an object's design may be very intentionally aimed at limiting alternative functions based on a particular "problem." Rosenberger observes that bench manufacturers rarely advertise the fact that these designs are specifically intended to discourage sleeping, although on occasion such partitions and armrests are referred to as "antiloitering" features. The intentions of these restrictionary modifications in design are not made explicit through marketing, and often, they are not obvious to observers who do not experience the need to resort to public benches for sleep.

Restriction of Function and Aesthetic Harm

On the other hand, Bob Barker Company, a massive manufacturer of prison goods, boasts on their homepage that "Bob Barker Company has introduced many new, innovative products to help solve customers' problems and make corrections and detention facilities safer." While this admission seems innocent enough, the explicitness with which they make clear who their products are designed for, despite the population that they will be used on, raises some concern. The frame of solving problems for correction officers and detention facilities as the highest priority seems to leave out the problems faced by the incarcerated who are subjected to these officers and facilities. As we saw earlier with uniforms, the design of these objects tends to

reinforce hierarchies between guards and inmates by catering to the guards and prison owners at the expense of the just treatment of incarcerated people. In a lot of ways, Bob Barker Company clearly advertises that their products have been designed to limit alternative functions. They don't feel the need to hide this fact because it is assumed to be a desirable goal to limit the choices that inmates have in any possible way (because it is assumed they will make bad choices; that is why they are in prison in the first place).

In spring 2021, the front page of Bob Barker Company's website proudly announced their new line of "Flexible Products." The name carries some irony as the products are designed to be materially flexible, with the explicit intent of these objects becoming less flexible to possibilities of alternative use. One such product is a chess set made entirely of silicone pieces on a silicone board.[19] The product details offer an insight into the functions that are being limited by designing the chess set in this way. First and foremost, the silicone chess set is presented as a solution to the problem of objects like game pieces being used as weapons. We are supposed to take for granted that this is a desirable goal, avoiding the violence that could come from inmates turning everyday objects into weapons. However, I think that we should turn our attention to a different set of considerations: what are the circumstances that lead incarcerated people to manipulate objects into weapons? Is it something in the nature of an inmate, or, perhaps, is it a reflection of the way carceral settings treat human beings, that drives people to seek out weapons as one of the limited means to having any power under those circumstances? While it may seem harmless and even desirable for objects intended for carceral spaces to be designed with attention

[19] Bob Barker Company. (n.d.). VersiFlex Silicone Chess Set. https://www.bobbarker.com/silicone-chess-set?page=1

to inmate and officer safety, what undesirable effects come from limiting objects to a primary function?

Similarly, the silicone fingertip toothbrush design by Bob Barker Company may still complete the primary function of performing dental hygiene, but being deprived of the use of a standard design toothbrush also deprives one of dignity (a) because you are not trusted to use a toothbrush without using it the "wrong" way and turning it into a weapon and (b) because you are using a product that may still "get the job done" but in a less satisfying way.[20] In the case of the chess set, the grayscale color scheme is bland compared to chess sets which offer more visual interest through their different colors and textures. The silicone pieces will not produce much sound when they hit the board, a feature which Bob Barker advertises as a benefit: "quiet when slammed or dropped."[21] This deprives players of the auditory experience that comes with playing chess, reducing some of the sensory pleasure one may get from playing chess with a more traditional set up. With the toothbrush example, the handle is sacrificed to ensure that the alternate function of weapon is excluded, but this also means that the toothbrush user has to use their hand to brush their teeth, in an environment where frequent handwashing is not always an option. In both cases, everyday aesthetic experiences related to play and hygiene routines are disrupted by products which do not deliver the same experience as products used in the so-called free world. These objects also make the experience of brushing one's teeth or playing chess in prison less similar to the experience of these activities in the so-called free world, a quality which may further diminish the quality or satisfaction of these experiences. The benefits of activity in prison which reproduces familiarity to life on this outside will be discussed in Chapter IV.

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[20] Bob Barker Company. (n.d.). *Fingertip Toothbrush.* https://www.bobbarker.com/fingertip-toothbrush-125
[21] Bob Barker Company. (n.d.). *VersiFlex Silicone Chess Set*. https://www.bobbarker.com/silicone-chess-set?page=1

In and of itself, designing products that minimize weaponization is not a harm. The goal of reducing weaponization to reduce violence certainly has merit. The issue is that products which reduce weaponization do not get to the heart of the cause of violence in prisons (or generally). State violence contributes to interpersonal violence; degrading and dehumanizing people leads to violence. Research indicates that inadequately treated mental health conditions, often exacerbated by prison conditions, contribute to a significant amount of prison violence. (Toch & Kupers, 2007) Taylor et al. (2013) argues that incarceration in the United States rarely treats the root causes of violence in human behavior, such as untreated mental illness or other effects of preexisting trauma. With the roots of violence unattended to, they conclude that the violence of prison will continue spreading inside and outside of the prison walls. (Taylor et al., 2013) It is striking that this literature may suggest that incarceration could in fact exacerbate violence in some cases, both within the prison walls and in the broader community.

Products which aim to reduce weaponization while also committing aesthetic harm [?] also communicate to prisoners that they are not trustworthy and not worthy of dignity or comfort. The root of violence in prison or in society is not toothbrushes which can be whittled into shivs, and so silicone finger sleeve toothbrushes will not undo this violence. It is violent to treat human beings without human dignity, to dehumanize them and let them live in inhumane conditions.

Put differently, solely targeting the design of objects and the space of prison will not rid prisons of their violence, they actually contribute to the conditions that foster violence. Bob Barker Company's innovative and patented designs for objects which reduce the possibility of using them as a tool for suicide do not address the root of the suicide crisis in jails and prisons. To adequately attempt to address the suicide crisis in jails and prisons, minimally, evidence-backed approaches should be implemented such as the elimination of inhumane conditions for

prisoners, access to healthcare, access to communications with the outside world as well as others within the prison, etc.

I argue that the limited functionality of prison goods has undesirable effects that outweigh the desirable, namely, objects designed in this way do not center the humanity of the users of these objects, which results in dehumanizing them. In the case of the Bob Barker silicone chess set, even for an inmate who had no intention of using a chess piece as a weapon, the experience of playing chess on a board explicitly designed to limit this function can be seen as infantilizing. The paternalism present in designing a game board intended for use by adults with these considerations in mind demonstrates the belief that inmates lack self-restraint, like animals or children. This strategy is an example of Haslam's notion of animalistic dehumanization, as discussed in chapter II. Further, the restriction of function present in prison goods contributes to the decreased aesthetic agency people have while incarcerated. Even when a good is unable to completely eradicate the possibility of using it for an alternative function, the rules of these institutions make restriction of function enforceable by the constant threat of punishment for rules transgression. Thus, there are two ways that function can be limited: through design and through rules that restrict how objects may be used. Bob Barker's chess set is an example of design which intentionally restricts the function of goods for the inmates they are designed for. The example of using Skittles for functions other than their primary function as food, such as making art, shows how rules can limit functionality even when the design of the object permits alternative function. The prison's rules about preventing food waste limit the permissible functionality of the food. Restriction of function can contribute to aesthetic harm because it limits the possibilities for satisfying aesthetic experiences and aesthetic agency. Additionally, rule-based restriction of function is linked to restriction of aesthetic agency. The choices one can

make about how to create using food, for example, are limited by the prison's rules about food waste.

These examples taken in isolation might not be severe enough to constitute aesthetic harm, but they are examples of how the whole environment of prison has been stripped of satisfying aesthetic qualities. There is an intentional use of practices of harm that appear to be "trivial" or minor. These seemingly minor harms fly below the radar of our moral concern. The pervasiveness of these aesthetic harms being underestimated is part of what makes them damaging. Taken together, these examples make up the conditions of carceral spaces which are rife with aesthetic harm. The repeated exposure to a variety of daily aesthetic harms raises the level of harm to become torturous in some cases.

While the design-based and rule-based restrictions of function directly limit the possibilities for using prison goods in ways alternative to their intended function (like Skittles for pigment in art), there is evidence that these restrictions may sometimes increase creativity, rather than undermine it completely. In *Marking Time*, Fleetwood interviews many current and former incarcerated artists who cite the intense restrictions of prison life as a generative force for their creative practices. This will be explored further in Chapter IV.

Environmental Factors

The discussion above analyzes specific objects designed for carceral spaces and their function in harming and dehumanizing the inhabitants of these spaces. I turn now to examining the broader environmental factors contributing to aesthetic harm in jails and prisons, such as the architecture of the space itself and the direct manipulation of specific aspects of sensory experience. I argue that there is a component of aesthetic harm to the punishment that occurs in jails and prisons. These aesthetic harms involve having one's aesthetic agency reduced as well as

being subjected to sensory deprivation and sensory overload (these are not necessarily distinct; they overlap and work together). The absence of silence in carceral institutions, for example, plays a role in the aesthetic experience of being incarcerated. Overcrowded units with many people crammed together in small spaces and the loud demands of guards being shouted throughout the day and night are obvious examples of sensory overload when it comes to sound in jails and prisons, but there are other conditions that amplify the effects of these sounds, quite literally.

Prefabricated jail cells are preferred in many carceral institutions' construction projects because they can be constructed at a faster rate than traditional jail construction which utilizes masonry. One of the design elements of prefabricated jail cells are their steel walls, which, according to Samuels Group, "can be exceptionally loud and create echoes throughout the facility. Inmates pounding on walls, closing detention doors, shouting, and other noises reverberate, creating an unpleasant atmosphere for other inmates and correctional officers on duty."[22] The echo effect of the steel walls amplifies the sound in an already noisy environment, making the experience of noise more intense and difficult to disengage from. This is one level of understanding the overwhelming lack of quiet and proliferation of loud, echoing sounds as an unpleasant sensory experience for anyone in the building.

Music Torture

There are also documented cases of music being used as a form of punishment and torture against inmates. John Basco was an inmate at the Oklahoma County Detention Center in Oklahoma City where he was tortured by two correctional officers in 2019. The officers forced Basco and at least two other inmates into empty attorney visitation rooms where they were

[22] https://www.samuelsgroup.net/blog/prefabricated-jail-cells-jail-construction-faqs

handcuffed and forced to stand against the wall for hours while the once-viral children's song "Baby Shark" played loudly on repeat. A lawsuit was brought forth against these two officers as well as their supervisor who knew about the incidents and allowed them to continue. The officers were charged with cruelty to prisoners, corporal punishment to an inmate and conspiracy and terminated from their employment at the detention center. This case became widely reported in September 2022 when John Basco, one of the plaintiffs in the lawsuit against the officers, was found dead in his cell 3 days after being reintroduced to the Oklahoma County Detention Center on new charges. In this case, it wasn't merely noises like doors slamming or people shouting, but music that was used to create a torturous aesthetic experience for the victims of this act.

It is important to note that the few cases of abuses which gain traction in media coverage and result in consequences for those perpetuating the harms do not represent the total amount of these harms, nor a norm in how these harms are responded to. Especially for those of us with loved ones who are incarcerated, it is known that there are far more injustices and harms which occur against the incarcerated than those which are reported on, let alone resolved through a settlement or another type of remedy to the harm experienced. Further, the possibility of this kind of torture is enabled by the fact that the carceral situation gives the jailers total control. The use of solitary confinement, for example, is left almost entirely up to the control of guards with very little (if any) oversight or regulations around how or when it should be implemented. The literature on solitary confinement in US prisons points to jurisdictional differences in the limitations on the allowed duration of solitary confinement (Chan, 2020) and the concerns about denying due process through the implementation of solitary confinement. (Umphres, 2017)

Similarly, guards are often protected from the consequences of their everyday abuses against the incarcerated. It is very difficult for incarcerated people to successfully defend

themselves against abuses and mistreatment through the courts. The Prison Litigation Reform Act was passed in 1996 and has made it more difficult for prisoners to file lawsuits in federal court. (ACLU, 2008) This act, combined with other factors which make it difficult for prisoners to fight their negligent conditions such as the inability to collect data and evidence while incarcerated and the likelihood of retaliation from guards, contributes to what Hogle & Shapiro (2017) refer to as "practical immunity" which "is not a formal exemption from suit, but it might as well be: the legal and situational barriers constituting practical immunity make it all but impossible for a prisoner to establish a prison official's liability for abuse." (p. 2023) In the rare cases where an abusive guard faces disciplinary consequences, we should not be too quick to declare justice served. Occasional penalties for pervasive violence from guards in corrections facilities can provide a cover for the system, framing these cases of abuse as anomalies which are swiftly dealt with. The carceral system's failure to adequately deal with guard violence at large also signals the dehumanization of the incarcerated. Guards may find it easy or acceptable to harm prisoners because they do not view them as fully human or deserving of the protection and respect usually given to another human being. (Haney, 2008)

Music torture, sometimes referred to as "sonic torture" or "noise torture," is well documented as a psychological warfare technique. (Cusick, 2020; Nowak, 2022; Peters, 2019) Specifically, it has been written about in the context of the United States military forces' use of this strategy against their enemies in the war on terror. Surveying some of the literature on this topic, there is a consensus that at least part of what makes the use of music in punishment or interrogations effective as torture is the repetition of the same song or a set of songs played at high volumes for a sustained period. There is less attention given to analyzing the other components of using music as torture such as the social and cultural meaning behind choosing

songs to torture specific populations. I argue that there is an aesthetic component that goes beyond the discomfort of listening to loud, repeated noises which makes music torture particularly effective and egregious.

One way of understanding the aesthetic component of music torture lies in considering the cultural elements of music. In a 2003 *Newsweek* article reporting on the use of music to torture and interrogate Iraqi prisoners of war, Sergeant Mark Hadsell of the US's Psychological Operations Company (Psy Ops) was quoted saying the following about the reasoning for choosing heavy metal music to interrogate the POWs: "These people haven't heard heavy metal. They can't take it. If you play it for 24 hours, your brain and body functions start to slide, your train of thought slows down and your will is broken. That's when we come in and talk to them." (Chebatoris, 2003) This statement acknowledges that the choice of music genre was determined at least in part by what was culturally unfamiliar to the subjects of this torture, and that this cultural unfamiliarity was thought to add an additional layer of discomfort to the listener.

Music torture breaks down the agency of the person subjected to this harm and their ability to function. Music used as an aesthetic mechanism for harm undermines one's human capabilities: you can no longer think clearly, your subjectivity is infringed upon, your cognition impaired, emotions negatively affected, and agency undermined. According to the Hadsell quote above, these are the intended effects of music torture when used as a military tactic. This description of music torture as undermining one's human capabilities is explicitly linked to dehumanization, which involves regarding or treating another as not having uniquely or exclusively human qualities.

While much of the literature on music torture discusses its use in war, these tactics are also present in other contexts and deployed against people for ends other than interrogation.

Another example of deploying music to cause discomfort in a targeted other is the case of 7-Eleven (among other corporations) using classical music played loudly outside of their stores to deter loitering. Lily E. Hirsch's "Weaponizing Classical Music: Crime Prevention and Symbolic Power in the Age of Repetition" has an excellent discussion on this phenomenon.

Hirsch offers an account of classical music's use as a behavioral motivator. Hirsch refers to classical music played as a behavioral deterrent as a destructive use of music. She describes our musical soundscape as the soundtrack to our engaging with the world around us, from music in supermarkets meant to serve a pleasant function for shoppers to the use of loud, constant classical music playing through outdoor convenience stores' speakers with explicit intent to deter loiterers. Literature on the practice of using music as a weapon often focuses on music considered violent or masculine, such as heavy metal used on POWs as discussed above. Hirsch's work contributes to this literature by showing how even music that is not considered inherently violent, like classical music, can be used as "a weapon of aggression, replacing direct conflict and silencing the conversations and negotiations that ultimately lead to long-term resolutions." (Hirsch, 2007, p. 343) Hirsch spoke with 7-Eleven Corporate Communications representative Margaret Chabris, who claimed that 7-Eleven was the first to use music as a deterrent, or as Hirsch describes it, to "purposely flip programmed music's primary function from lure to repellent." (Hirsch, 2007, p. 345) As Chabris explains it, their management team underwent research and brainstorming sessions to find a deterrent to loitering in response to several 7-Eleven stores in British Columbia, Canada, experiencing a "loitering problem" in 1985. "One of the ideas was to play 'easy listening' or classical music in the parking lot. The thinking was that this kind of music is not popular with teens and may discourage them from 'hanging

out' at the store." (Chabris, 2007, as cited by Hirsch, 2007, p. 345) Hirsch points out that music used in this way explicitly works to reinforce who is wanted and unwanted in space.

> Just as birds designate territory through song, authorities territorialize space through classical music by marking certain area as off limits and thus creating an aural fence or "sound wall"... Of course government and business leaders are a bit more discerning than birds in their employment of music—endeavoring to use sound to include the wanted and exclude the unwanted. In other words, officials have found a way to use noise to unnaturally select, more like an ultrasonic pest repellent, which drives away offending rodents with sounds that do not harm unoffending house pets. (Hirsch, 2007, p. 349)

This concept of music being used as a marker of space connects to the use of aesthetic elements in carceral spaces to reinforce who is wanted and unwanted. In the case of prisons, the goal would not be to deter someone from being in a space like it is with the 7-Eleven example, since obviously incarcerated folks are being held by force in the space. In the carceral setting, we may understand the auditory harms of prison to signal who is valued and who is not. Just like the design of prison goods which explicitly centers the needs of prison staff and not the people who will use these objects, harmful auditory conditions in prison can express a disregard for the wellbeing of the incarcerated. The experience of noise and music alike in jails or prisons may serve as a reminder to the person who does not get to leave the space, the imprisoned person who is held hostage in the space, of their being subjected to the noises and music of *others* with little say in the curation of their soundtrack to their day. The opportunity to listen to music of your choosing while incarcerated is seriously limited. The availability of certain music on tablets or other available prison media devices, whether free or for a fee, at what time of day, etc., all depends on others' decision-making authority.

In the case of the correctional officers who forced inmates to listen to "Baby Shark" on repeat, there seem to be elements of harm that are specific to the song choice itself as well as the intention of the officers to use the song for harm. In other words, there may be certain musical elements within the song that make the song particularly egregious to listen to on repeat. Some people seem to think that children's songs such as this one that are designed to be easily memorized are catchier than others, proving to be particularly difficult earworms to rid oneself of. If it is true that there are elements of "Baby Shark" that make the song itself particularly annoying to adult listeners, that is one way of understanding how forcing inmates to listen to this song is harmful or even torturous. Beyond the specific components and characteristics of the song itself, though, there is what the interaction between CO's and the inmates forced to listen to the song on repeat conveys to the inmate. *Any* song that an incarcerated person is forced to listen to is a reminder that they are not primarily in charge of their experiences, aesthetic or otherwise. You are subjected to a variety of aesthetic displeasures (among other harms) that you get to have very little say in. You are subject to aesthetic choices of others' design and, especially and clearly in this example, aesthetic choices that are negative and will do harm are sometimes used as a method of punishment for the incarcerated. The experience of listening to songs that you do not get to choose, especially when the experience is purposefully unpleasant because it is being used as a form of punishment, is a reinforcement of lost agency and aesthetic agency as an incarcerated person. This loss of agency is connected to dehumanization.

The carceral objects and the carceral environment taken together compound the indignity of these aesthetic harms, and this influences both how prisoners are viewed and how they may come to view themselves as less than human. The compounding effects of a very pervasive environment of aesthetic harm are important: it's not just about any individual harm, since these

harms stack to construct the aesthetically harmful environment as a whole. Caging people is animalistic dehumanization. Feeding them slop is animalistic dehumanization. Treating them as if they are too threatening to possess a toothbrush with a handle assumes that they are monsters. Haney's (2008) concept of the "ecology of cruelty" captures the way that many elements of incarceration layer together to create dehumanizing conditions.

> There are other components to the ecology of cruelty that dominates these places. For example, the sophisticated architecture and new generation of technology that enhance the level of punishment and control that can be achieved in supermax are supplemented with more traditional tools from another correctional era. Thus, guards have ready access to and rely heavily on handcuffs, belly chains, leg irons, spit shields, strip cells, four-point restraints, canisters of pepper spray, batons, and rifles to control prisoner behavior in supermax. Indeed, because supermaxes run almost entirely on the norms of punishment and subjugation, guards are vulnerable to what has been termed "the law of the instrument"-the notion that when your only tool is a hammer, everything looks like a nail. Obviously, the narrowly punitive range of "hammers" that the typical supermax guard is given with which to manage problematic prisoners and respond to interpersonal conflict will constrain and constrict the nature of their responses and shape their views of prisoners and their problems. Thus, a particular image of supermax prisoners is forged and repeatedly reinforced by virtue of the manner in which guards are encouraged (or required) to respond to them. (Haney, 2008, p. 970)

The aesthetic environment of the prison reinforces harsh treatment of the incarcerated. Everything in the carceral space, from the objects for prisoners, objects made for guards to be used on prisoners, and the architecture of the space itself, is designed to limit the agency and

possibilities for unsanctioned behaviors from the incarcerated. This is justified through the dehumanization and demonization of the incarcerated which dictates that this controlling and highly restrictive environment is necessary for subduing a threatening population. Chapter IV will look to acts of aesthetic resistance from the incarcerated to counter this monstrous view of the incarcerated.

I have argued that one of the ways that aesthetic harm in carceral spaces contributes to dehumanization is through disregard or disrespect for others, expressed aesthetically. In Hirsch's piece on classical music used as a deterrent, she discusses the concept of Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED). CPTED is an approach to crime that recognizes the impact of our environment on our behavior. The idea behind CPTED is that "the proper design and effective use of the built environment can lead to a reduction in the fear of crime and the incidence of crime, and to an improvement in the quality of life." (Crowe, 1991, p.1, as cited in Hirsch, 2007, p. 349) As Hirsch notes, "The CPTED program, however, does not offer methods for solving broad issues of human behavior that underlie crime…" (Hirsch, 2007, p. 349) Rather, CPTED focuses on design variables which can be manipulated in an attempt to foreclose certain human behaviors. This does not address the root cause(s) of crime, the driving factors which contribute humans to participate in various illicit activity in the first place.

On the one hand, reduction in violence and the fear that violence perpetuates is clearly a good thing. On the other hand, as discussed above, the approaches to reducing violence through sensory deprivation and design are often not adequate or evidence-backed in terms of what is needed to reduce the true roots of violence in prisons (inhumane conditions, dehumanizing treatment, trauma and mental health afflictions that existed prior to incarceration as well as the trauma and mental health problems inflicted by incarceration itself, etc.). Further, given the

importance of aesthetic needs in our lives, the severe restriction of aesthetic agency and access to satisfaction of aesthetic needs, and the resulting aesthetic harms, also contribute negatively to the environment of prison. Aesthetic harms are a part of what makes up the inhumane and dehumanizing conditions of prisons; thus aesthetic harms play a role in how these conditions shape violence on the inside.

Chapter IV will explore the myriad of ways that incarcerated people fight to reclaim or maintain what is left of their aesthetic agency while incarcerated. These practices include artmaking, preparing meals, altering uniforms, beauty practices, and more. In each example, the risks taken by the prisoner to engage in these activities is considered alongside their benefits to their overall wellbeing. Many incarcerated people refer to engaging in aesthetic practices while doing time as a method of survival. Their stories and creations will be explored in consideration of what they can show us about aesthetic needs, harm, agency, dehumanization, and resistance. These acts of aesthetic resistance show us the importance of centering the needs, agency and perspectives of incarcerated people in our approaches to punishment. The lengths that incarcerated people go to in order to reclaim aesthetic agency and a semblance of dignified conditions point to the importance of these aesthetic needs for their wellbeing. If we want carceral spaces to do anything like rehabilitating or reforming people, we must care about and offer conditions which support their wellbeing. This includes support for aesthetic needs and aesthetic agency.

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Chapter IV. Resisting Dehumanization and Countering Aesthetic Harms

This project has explored aesthetic needs, aesthetic harms, aesthetic agency, and their relationship to dehumanization. Chapter III examined examples of these relationships as they play out in different settings: from living in poverty to living in carceral spaces. This chapter explores the aesthetic practices of incarcerated people: what can we learn about aesthetic needs and harm, aesthetic agency and dehumanization through these examples?

As I will demonstrate in this chapter, there is a rich tradition of engaging in various aesthetic practices in prisons, despite (and perhaps in some cases even *because* of- more on that later) the extremely restrictive conditions of incarceration. These practices, alongside the testimony of those who engage in them, offer insight into the complex role of aesthetics in our daily lives. First, incarcerated people go to great lengths and take on significant risk to engage in aesthetic practices in carceral spaces. That they are willing to take this risk says something about the importance of aesthetic needs to our wellbeing. We are harmed when we are kept from meeting our aesthetic needs through reduced aesthetic agency and trapped in aesthetically harmful circumstances. To the extent possible, we will work to ameliorate these harms with whatever modicum of aesthetic agency is available to us. The extreme conditions of restricted agency, including aesthetic agency, in US jails and prisons make the creative acts that manage to transpire in these spaces especially interesting for examining how oppressive aesthetic conditions can inspire creativity.

Second, just as aesthetic harm and restrictions to aesthetic agency can contribute to dehumanization, aesthetic practices and engagement can contribute to humanization. As discussed in chapter II, dehumanization can describe a process which impacts the way an outsider to a particular group views that group as less than human, and it can also target the

dehumanized other's own view of the self, or self-dehumanization. Similarly, the humanization process can target the outsider's view of the dehumanized, and it can also impact the way the dehumanized person feels about themselves. On the latter point, it is clear through testimony from the incarcerated and formerly incarcerated that engaging in aesthetic practices while incarcerated has a major impact on their wellbeing and self-worth. To the former point, it is difficult to gauge the impact that observing the aesthetic practices of the incarcerated can have on outsiders' views of them, simply because these acts are not largely circulated or known outside of the community of people who are most directly impacted by incarceration. (There is increasing attention on prison art, but much less on everyday aesthetic practices like prison food making, uniform altering, etc.; and even still, none of the above is particularly mainstream or widely shared.) I have come to learn about the aesthetic practices of people in carceral spaces through my personal relationships to incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people. As I discuss in this chapter, there is a significant social and community building aspect of aesthetic practices across carceral spaces. In my own experience, I have been the recipient of many artifacts of aesthetic resistance (such as drawings, constructed cards, homemade games, recipes for prison meals) and I have helped contribute to aesthetic resistance through expanding my loved ones' access to images, music, and even scents. Aesthetic resistance not only works to (at least partially) regain or retain aesthetic autonomy and express oneself creatively, it also has the potential to form and/or maintain bonds between people, both inside the prison walls beyond them. I am deeply grateful to be in community across prison walls with my incarcerated friends who have trusted me with their stories and creations, and further trusted me to share these stories and creations with others.

For the same reasons aesthetic harm can contribute to dehumanization, aesthetic goods can have a role in humanizing a dehumanized population. In the context of prison, the products of aesthetic practice may not always be considered aesthetically positive in the traditional sense. Prison pizza, for example, is made of ingredients that are not typical of a pizza nor are they very high-quality ingredients. In these cases, the aesthetic good should be understood to involve more than just the finished product, evaluated by traditional standards. The process of planning and making the pizza, the collaboration and creativity which must go into that process in carceral spaces, is rich with aesthetic value. Because aesthetics tends to have strong effects on sentiment, the act of participating in and sharing aesthetic resistance strategies offers a unique emotional quality that is humanizing to the person participating. Further, when these aesthetic resistance practices are shared with others there is the possibility for others to see the formerly dehumanized as more human, too. In other words, aesthetic resistance can play a role in rehumanizing the incarcerated both in terms of their own sense of self, as a counter to self-dehumanization, and in the view of others. Aesthetic resistance practices reveal the agency, creativity, and social and personal motivations and concerns of the incarcerated. This highlights their humanity and counters their dehumanization.

Finally, the above considerations reinforce the role of aesthetics in our daily lives. There are aesthetic mechanisms of harm and control, and there are aesthetic mechanisms in the resistance to those harms and control. Engaging in aesthetic practices which are meaningful to the participant, despite conditions which utilize aesthetic mechanisms of harm to control and punish, is a way of pushing back against the intended harm to one's humanity. Aesthetic resistance through art has been explored, including projects which connect directly to incarceration like Tamms Year Ten's use of poetry and visual art (they called it "legislative art")

as a tool for closing the Tamms Supermax Facility. (Reynolds & Eisenman, 2013) Everyday aesthetics has recognized the impact of aesthetic elements of life outside the art world on our personal, social and ethical lives. Further work on everyday aesthetic resistance could build on my argument here that engaging in aesthetic practices under certain conditions is a part of the refusal to accept conditions of unjustly restricted aesthetic agency. People are sometimes limited in their ability to engage in satisfying aesthetic practices and experiences because of constraints that are socially and politically imposed. On this account, combatting reduced aesthetic agency that is the result of a power imbalance or injustice constitutes an act of aesthetic resistance.

Aesthetic resistance broadly includes acts of resistance which take an aesthetic form. An act of resistance can be considered aesthetic when special attention is given by the person engaging in the act of resistance to aesthetic qualities and aesthetic evaluations. Within this, there are acts of aesthetic resistance which specifically target the reclaiming of aesthetic agency. This chapter will focus on the latter, particularly in the context of incarceration where restricted aesthetic agency is unjustly part of the punishment of incarceration. It is important to note that though these aesthetic practices which resist the dehumanization and counter the aesthetic harms of carceral spaces have significant meaning and impact for the incarcerated people who engage in them, they do not undo the aesthetic or other harms of incarceration. I discuss these examples of aesthetic resistance to show the importance of aesthetic needs in our lives and to highlight the great lengths to which people will go to counter aesthetic harm, including extreme restrictions to their aesthetic agency. While I am interested in how these acts of aesthetic resistance shape life on the inside for those who are incarcerated, I also believe that these acts are important to witness as outsiders to this system. The stories of aesthetic resistance from within carceral spaces have the potential to pierce through our assumptions about people who are incarcerated. These

acts of aesthetic resistance demonstrate that incarcerated people are engaged in deeply human projects of expressing themselves creatively, connecting with one another through aesthetic engagement, and fighting to better meet their needs and sometimes each other's needs, including aesthetic needs. The direct perspective of those who have lived through incarceration is not nearly present enough in our discussions of their conditions, and I include a few instances of their direct expression here to support my claims.

The Tradition of Aesthetic Engagement in Carceral Spaces

Despite the lengths to which carceral settings go to restrict aesthetic agency, incarcerated folks often find ways to engage in aesthetic practices. While the aesthetic practices they engage in are typical of practices engaged in outside of the prison (e.g. cooking meals, putting on makeup, drawing, painting, writing poetry, etc.), the restrictive conditions of incarceration shape the methods and materials utilized in these aesthetic practices. The carceral space and its conditions warp these practices to include methods and materials that are often atypical to participating in these aesthetic practices outside of these spaces (in the so-called free world). For example, many of these resistance practices involve reappropriating state materials and goods supplied by the carceral institution for uses other than their state sanctioned function. (Fleetwood, 2020, p. 10) This is a direct result of the practices occurring within the carceral site, in a context where there is very little access to materials which are not property of the institution. This section will explore aesthetic engagement through art and everyday aesthetic practices.

Nicole Fleetwood's work in carceral aesthetics has been critical for bringing direct testimony of the incarcerated and formerly incarcerated into the literature on prison art and artmaking. *Marking Time: Art in the Age of Mass Incarceration* (2020) provides an extensive collection of prison art and interviews with the artists which enlighten readers to the prevalence

of and function of artmaking in US jails and prisons. While each person's story is unique, there are commonalities among the testimonies provided: many incarcerated artists express that engaging in aesthetic practices like artmaking was critical for surviving their time inside. They often appeal to the ways that artmaking allowed them to process emotions, feel self-worth, and counter the negative aesthetic conditions of carceral space. Of course, it is important not to overstate the power of aesthetic resistance. While engaging in aesthetic resistance can contribute to a better overall experience for the incarcerated, it is not sufficient to remedy the harms of incarceration altogether. As Fleetwood puts it: "What I learned is that art in prison is a practice of survival, an aesthetic journey that documents time in captivity, a mode of connecting with others, but it does not resolve the injustices rooted in the carceral system." (Fleetwood, 2020, p. xxiii) Still, the impact on the incarcerated of engaging in aesthetic practices is important to recognize because these practices play an important role in surviving time in carceral spaces. They also showcase a type of creative ingenuity which is worthy of our acknowledgement. The recognition of the skills and risks that go into carceral aesthetic engagement may also contribute to our respect for or humanization of the incarcerated.

Aesthetic Practices as Survival in Carceral Spaces

There are at least two main ways to understand the relationship between aesthetic practices in carceral spaces and survival. First, sometimes artmaking or other forms of aesthetic creation directly contribute to a practical or survival need apart from an aesthetic need. For example, many incarcerated artists produce art to sell or trade with other prisoners to gain access to needed resources such as extra food, hygiene items, money to send home to family, and so on. As Fleetwood describes it, "Beyond aesthetic value, portraiture is a type of prison currency as well." (Fleetwood, 2020, p. 17) Many of the incarcerated artists she interviewed reference the

sale or trade of their prison art as an important survival tactic. As Fleetwood's interviewees mention, the sale of portraits is a particular kind of in-demand prison art as prison currency, but it is not the only example. There is also a longstanding practice of illustrating cards and letters for sale or trade within jails and prisons. I can speak to this from personal experience corresponding with incarcerated artists, but I also should note that this practice is dying as far as I can tell due to the severe restrictions on paper mail that have been put in place in recent years. (Wang, 2022) In these examples, prison art is used as a sort of means to an end, a way of advancing other needs by gaining access to resources through the sale and trade of art. There is another layer of prison art being used as a tool for other forms of survival: for some, prison art has connected them with advocates in the outside world who were able to help facilitate their release from prison. (Fleetwood, 2020, p.18)

Aesthetic engagement itself also contributes to survival when individuals feel the benefits of this engagement regardless of secondary benefits like prison art utilized as currency. People who have experienced the extreme conditions of isolation and deprivation in solitary confinement often refer to aesthetic practices as a way of staying connected to their sense of self. Fleetwood notes:

> I was struck by the fact that every person I interviewed spoke of how making art created a community and sense of belonging for them. They spoke of making art in captivity as a relational practice that fostered friendships among incarcerated people, and sometimes with prison staff and art teachers... For the many people I interviewed who had been in solitary confinement, art-making was crucial to maintaining a relationship with self, and to creating a subject position that defied the extreme deprivation of isolation units. (Fleetwood, 2020, p. 18)

As we saw in chapter III, aesthetic harms in carceral spaces attack the humanity of the incarcerated through stripping them of their individuality, severely constricting their aesthetic agency, and reducing their ability to have their aesthetic needs met, interfering with their wellbeing. Fleetwood's interviews highlight the role of aesthetic engagement in at least partially mitigating these harms. Aesthetic practices such as artmaking were described by many as fostering relationships with others, against the isolation and social deprivation of carceral spaces. In addition to promoting relationships with others, Fleetwood's reflection also names the ways that creative practices have the power to advance and maintain the relationship to the self. Beyond artmaking, I will explore more everyday aesthetic practices which have similar power in terms of their ability to work against the effects of aesthetic harm, such as dehumanization and self-dehumanization, in jails and prisons.

There are contexts where uniforms can serve a positive role for those wearing them. Such is the case when the uniform of a dream job is finally earned, or when sharing a uniform with a team brings people together in sports and other social activities. Incarcerated people are subjected to prison uniforms which strip them of their self-worth, identity, and individuality. When they practice aesthetic resistance by altering their uniforms to better reflect their preferences, they are able to transform these uniforms into clothing which comes closer (though still in a severely limited way) to reflecting their self-worth, identity and individuality.

Worn Stories is a 2021 Netflix series based on Emily Spivack's book of the same title. Spivack describes the stories as "sartorial memoirs" that reveal the ways that clothes are intertwined with our memories, status in society, identity, etc. (Spivack, 2021) In two of the six episodes, formerly incarcerated people are interviewed about the role of clothing before, during,

and after incarceration. The interviewees share a common reflection on prison uniforming and the way that it strips one of their identity and harms them through a loss of dignity and self.

Episode 5, "Uniforms," shares the story of Antwan, a recently freed incarcerated man who learned to sew while incarcerated. Antwan has a powerful way of describing the negative effects of uniforming in prisons:

> So much about who we are is stitched into the fabrics that we wear every day. Uniforms have way more of a significance than making sure that people can be identified; it's how other people see us, or how other people saw me, and how they saw me changed how they treated me, and how they treated me changed how I understood myself and my value.

Antwan was compelled to resist the aesthetic of the prison uniform, turning to unsanctioned practices of altering clothing to regain a sense of sartorial agency. He received a sewing kit and sewing lessons from a fellow inmate and began designing new looks out of existing prison uniforms. He set out to tailor clothes to be fitted to him and to remove lettering that marked him as property of the institution.

Prison uniforms often neglect to accommodate the size of their subjects. They are often made to be "one-size-fits-all" or available in only a few sizes. For Antwan, this meant his clothes were always baggy, limiting his movement by forcing him to constantly hold on to his pants to avoid them slipping right off. He also talks about the associations of baggy clothes with stereotypes of "thugs" and how he felt this look made him look like more of a threat to guards and others, even though he had no control over the fit of his clothes. Another formerly incarcerated interviewee in Episode 2 also emphasizes how sizing plays a role in the harms done by prison uniforming and the strangeness of being released only to realize that you have no clue

what size you wear. Antwan's alterations included tailoring his uniform for a better fit, something which made him feel more comfortable in his clothing.

Antwan's other sewing endeavor involved removing lettering from the prison-issued pants. The pants at his institution were branded with the words "CDC PRISONER" from the hip down to the bottom of the shin, the entire right leg. To create pants without this branding, Antwan would purchase two pairs of pants and create a new pair out of two left legs. The result was a pair of pants clear of the direct indication of being prisoner.

Of course, this sort of altering of prison uniforms is forbidden and carries a punishment. Like many prison rules, enforcement varies widely depending on a variety of factors. In Antwan's case, he was wearing clothes he had altered for 2 years of his sentence before he ended up being punished by a month in solitary confinement, along with the confiscating of his creations. Antwan describes being questioned by the authorities about why he was tampering with his clothing. He expressed that the message from prison officials was clear: "You can't look like anybody else, you have to look like everybody else." Still, upon release from solitary, Antwan continued to alter clothes. It was worth the risk for him because he described wearing his altered clothing as an experience that took him "mentally and emotionally to… any and every place outside of prison." These methods of altering prison uniforms are aesthetic resistance strategies which fight the dehumanization of incarceration by reclaiming sartorial agency.

The risks people take to engage in aesthetic resistance demonstrate how strong the aesthetic need is. Antwan continues to alter uniforms even after being punished with solitary confinement, a punishment which has severe harms and risks to mental health even when inflicted for relatively short periods of time. (Herring, 2020) He continues to participate in aesthetic resistance despite the very real possibility of further harsh punishment because he is

compelled to express his aesthetic need to wear clothes that make him feel less like every other prisoner he is incarcerated with and more like himself. As Antwan puts it, prison uniforms change how you are seen by others and how you see yourself. Prison uniforms strip you of individuality while also marking you as a member of a dehumanized population, a criminal. By altering his clothes so that they did not look like everyone else's, and removing from his pants the literal words which marked him as prisoner, Antwan regains some of his individuality and is able to feel distanced from his condemnation as "CDC PRISONER." Other methods of aesthetic resistance showcase similar goals of reclaiming aesthetic agency and mimicking aesthetic experiences and choices that one would make in their free life.

We can also look at resistance practices that involve prison food to understand the aesthetic nature of these strategies. There are many ways that incarcerated persons attempt to take back aesthetic agency surrounding mealtime. The prison controls nearly all of the elements of mealtime: what they eat, when they eat, where they eat, who they eat with, and how much and how frequently they are allowed to eat. Incarcerated persons are sometimes able to purchase commissary food, one of the only prison-sanctioned options for being able to choose what to eat. Of course, this food is marked up with inaccessible pricing, and incarcerated people rarely have access to sufficient funds to supplement the small amount of food they are provided by the prison cafeteria. Sometimes incarcerated persons work together or alone to fundraise for commissary ingredients or take turns taking the risk of sneaking food out of the cafeteria to be repurposed in a new dish later. Often incarcerated people use these unsanctioned food-making practices to celebrate special occasions by making food that approximates special meals they would eat outside. Unsanctioned food-making practices are those which take place outside of the

sanctioned avenues for food preparation and consumption (work duties in the chow hall, eating the food served in the chow hall, eating commissary food prepared ordinarily).

In the case of a dear incarcerated friend of mine, Jose Angel Vega, this resistance looks like a collaborative pizza-making project.[23] The pizza was commissioned to celebrate a fellow inmate's birthday. Angel concocted the pizza, earning him a slice. Other men in their dorm contributed to the pizza through contributing commissary funds for ingredients, tampering with electricity in their cells to create a makeshift oven to cook the pizza, or sneaking food back from chow hall to add to the pizza. The pizza was made from saltines, bread, bologna, summer sausage, cheese squeeze, cheese puffs, chips and cheese crackers, ketchup, chili and beans. What I want to emphasize about the prison pizza example is that this is not merely an act of resistance used to satiate hunger or provide additional nutrition. This is not the ingredient list that my ideal pizza consists of, and these ingredients are not what we would traditionally consider gourmet. Nevertheless, the act of making the pizza under severe logistical constraints involves a reclamation of aesthetic agency through creatively engaging in the aesthetic practice of food preparation. There are aesthetic preferences that dictated that these ingredients, although unconventional, should be constructed into this form. This is a truly aesthetic aspect of resisting carceral control.

The following is an excerpt of Angel's own account of the role of jointly created meals in his experience of incarceration:

> Prison can be a very depressing and sometimes extremely dangerous place to live. Surrounded by barbed wire fences, and tower's that constantly watch our movements from high above. Can make one feel like we are nothing. like we are trapped with no air

[23] Angel has consented to have his story included in this dissertation. Personal correspondence, March 15th, 2020.

to breath. Most of our days are filled with officer's yelling. 'count time', 'sit up for count', 'inspection', 'open up your lockers', 'shake down'...Things can get really hard when we are called to the chapel and told that our grandmother or mother died. Or when Year after year we miss Christmas or Thanksgiving. Every New years that passes is another day of hope lost. However, in the mist of all that suffering. There are times when some people who are blessed financially, decided they want someone to cook for them and ask me who is not financially blessed to make them a pizza or a birthday cake for them and their friends or their ga*g brother. @ that point I get to do what I love to do and create a masterpiece using stuff bought from the prison canteen. **When I create things with food. For that day I feel like I am important and the pain of being in here and being in the system since age 5 goes away.[24] When I hear the words. 'Angel, you did that!!!' and Angel this s* it is off the chain and good ASF.** The best part is being able to get a piece of everything I made. Since September. I have made three birthday cakes, one pizza and two big meals using things like top Roman soups. I have never had anyone say that they did not like what I made. **Food really brings people together in here.** I feel bad for the ones who have no money like me, but who also cannot cook. So when I get my share. I always find someone less fortunate then me to share with. For that one second they act as we have been friends forever. Even though I know it's all bull s**t, and the next day they will pass by me as if I never existed. I still feel good for making a few peoples lives just a bit better. flavors for me have to be balanced. Too much salt, will ruin a party, too much sugar is a diabetic coma in the near future. However, no one gives a hoot, how sweet the

[24] Vega includes his time in the state foster care system as part of his time experiencing institutionalized unfreedom. Studies have shown that nearly half of the youth who enter foster care experience an encounter with the criminal justice system by age 17. (Courtney et al., 2004; Juvenile Law Center, 2018)

pastries I make. You only live once right? No one cares about colors as long as the food fast good.[25]

Examples such as the one above demonstrate how incarcerated people use aesthetic strategies to fight back against dehumanization. While dehumanization tactics strip incarcerated people of their agency and humanity, aesthetic forms of resistance re-assert this agency and humanity through engaging with aesthetic creativity and experience. Through the methods used to procure ingredients and assemble them into a pizza, the incarcerated chef gets to assert aesthetic agency by choosing what they want to eat and how they want to prepare it. The act of concocting the pizza itself alongside the experience of eating the pizza with other incarcerated people in your dorm provides an opportunity for satisfying aesthetic experience not only to the chef but also to the other inmates invited to share the pizza. Interestingly, the success of this aesthetic experience is not reliant on the quality of the pizza alone. They are limited to ingredients which are not particularly appealing or typical of a high-quality pizza. The success of this act of aesthetic resistance has to do with the process of constructing and sharing the pizza, a process which involved creative expression not typically allowed in the setting of prison and a level of collaboration which is also difficult to fulfill in an environment largely defined by isolation. This highlights the social aesthetics often involved in these aesthetic engagement practices.

In addition to providing food options that have more flavor, variety, and calories than the food served by the institution, carceral food-making practices serve an important social role. Currently incarcerated poet and author Tony Vick writes about his experiences with creative

[25] Letter from Jose Angel Vega, November 13th, 2023. Shared with permission. This letter was written by Angel to share with my students, who asked Angel what life in prison is like. Spelling and punctuation are as in the original, emphasis added by me.

food-making as a tool for safety and community building in prison. Since everyone needs to eat, and the chow halls rarely satisfy this need for food entirely with their meager portions and bland and often slop-like options, Vick sees food as an equalizer in prison. During his decades of incarceration, Vick has used food as a "form of violence harm reduction in prison." (Vick, 2024, n.p.) He describes creative food-making practices as a way of extending humanity to other incarcerated people, a tactic which has allowed him to gain friendships which also serve as protection behind prison walls. When he was transferred to a prison with a reputation of extreme violence, he used left-over foods he was able to pack for his transfer to create a snack for his new cellie, a gang enforcer. This snack was utilized as a peace offering which earned him protection from violence due to his cellie's status. Vick says the following about the use of creative food making practices as a form of violence harm reduction:

> Time and again, I've de-escalated conflict through a trusty recipe. I've found this a much more appealing option than picking up a shank and sinking my opinion into someone. But more than just decreasing conflict, a meal that has been prepared with care—and seasoning—helps restore the humanity that is chipped away by each pile of slop we're handed in the chow hall. I've been served trays of prison food containing everything from rat turds to used Band-Aids.
>
> The food we make for our fellow prisoners provides a framework for living in community, as it does on the outside. We bring food to new neighbors to welcome them and introduce ourselves. We share meals with those we know well or want to know better. We share how our day went, the good parts and the bad. We remind each other we're human. (Vick, 2024, n.p.)

Vick's account of unsanctioned prison food-making practices as a form of violence reduction critically recognizes a significant root of violence in prison: dehumanization. Prison food can dehumanize when people are offered food which is unappetizing at best and sometimes infested with maggots, feces and trash. This food is hazardous to human health and wellbeing. It subjects people to barely met nutritional requirements, inadequate portions and unsafe food conditions while also aesthetically harming them through lack of flavor and variety, unappealing presentation, and strict regulations around the time spent eating and who you may share a meal with. Unsanctioned food-making practices in jails or prisons, like the ones described by Vick or Vega, push back against this aesthetic harm and its dehumanizing impact. This is a good example of a case where fulfilling aesthetic needs connects to fulfilling other needs like social and nutritional needs. Because the only ingredients available to remix are those provided by the institution, which are rarely nutritionally adequate or satisfactorily healthy, the remixed jail or prison food is still limited in terms of its ability to meet health needs related to food. Still, having access to additional snacks or meals beyond what is served by chow hall allows one to increase the amount of calories consumed to combat hunger. The act of creating and eating unsanctioned jail and prison meals is also typically a social practice, as evidenced above. It takes multiple people to gather the ingredients, save the money for commissary items, construct the makeshift cooking apparatuses, cook and assemble the meal. It is also common to share the product of this process, the snack or meal, with others.

For some, the connection between food and hunger undermines the value of unsanctioned prison food creation as a mere act of satiating bodily needs, rather than an act of resistance, aesthetic or otherwise. Ashley Rubin argues that secondary adjustments, acts which break the rules or expectations of prison to fulfil the needs and desires of the incarcerated, are often too

strongly labeled as acts of resistance when really, they are acts of what she calls "friction." (Rubin, 2015, pp. 1-2) Rubin describes acts of resistance as acts which are "consciously disruptive, intentionally political actions." (Rubin, 2015. p. 2) Acts of friction, unlike true resistance, are "reactive behaviors that occur when people find themselves in highly controlled environments." She gives three criteria for acts of friction which distinguish them from acts of resistance:

> First, these frictional activities are normal human behaviors that happen to take place in prison. Second, these activities apparently respond to prisoners' social and physical needs and desires rather than to their understanding of autonomy, rights, or justice. Third, these activities are largely apolitical and do not intentionally challenge the prison regime. (Rubin, 2015, p. 2)

While Rubin does not focus exclusively on "secondary adjustments" which involve aesthetic practices, several of her examples involve what I call aesthetic resistance. In particular, she uses unsanctioned food making practices as an example of a secondary adjustment which does not constitute resistance because it merely reflects the natural need and desire to satiate hunger. I disagree with Rubin's reasoning for excluding these acts as forms of resistance. I argue that acts of aesthetic resistance, such as unsanctioned food making in carceral spaces, may involve both the drive to satisfy social and physical needs *and* the drive to protect and fight for one's humanity, dignity and rights.

To her first point, I acknowledge that aesthetic resistance is often motivated by trying to recreate experiences from the free world. Rather than negating the designation of these acts as resistance, I argue that attempting to recreate conditions or experiences from your free life resists the role of incarceration in separating you from those experiences. Jails and prisons disrupt most

normal activities: cooking for oneself, celebrating special occasions, socializing freely, etc. Aesthetic resistance acts which engage in these "normal human behaviors" resist the prison's dehumanization, the prison's denial of their need to participate in these normal behaviors. That these acts are normal to life on the outside of prison does not disqualify an act from being resistant. Performing acts that are normal to life on the outside in an environment which is designed to separate and deprive you from normal life is in fact a form of resistance. Through performing these normal acts, incarcerated people refuse to have everything taken from them, to the extent that they are able to push back against that loss of normal life and human experience.

That these acts of aesthetic resistance also respond to other needs, like social and physical needs, is not a problem for taking them to also involve resistance. Again, acts which resist the prison's rules that restrict these social and physical needs from being fully realized resist the prison's control over the agency and wellbeing of the incarcerated. We can understand acts like secondary adjustments or aesthetic resistance to contain multiple values and meanings; there is no need to limit them to being merely about physical needs. Arnold Berleant notes that aesthetic engagement, for example, can have value beyond the aesthetic without diminishing the role of the aesthetic in these experiences. "The fact that aesthetic value in these cases is not the only value involved does not diminish its significance but rather recognizes its pervasive presence." (Berleant, 2005, p. 11) Similarly, we can understand secondary adjustments in carceral contexts to have values that are multifaceted. That these acts fulfill one need which is considered more basic or automatic to satiate does not negate the other value they can represent, such as their role in resisting a dehumanizing prison regime.

Finally, there is reason to believe that acts of resistance need not contain intentional political messaging or positioning. Rubin argues that acts like unsanctioned food-making merely

show that people are hungry and do not make a statement against the political conditions of incarceration which contributes to their hunger. This view seems to operate on a narrow understanding of resistance. Cheryl Frazier has argued that acts of aesthetic resistance, such as beauty labor as a form of resistance, can be considered resistance even without explicit political messaging attached to the act. “Some acts of beauty labor as resistance involve a conscious, principled decision to dismantle oppressive beauty norms, whereas others will involve a more nebulous or vague feeling that the norms to which one is subject are somehow unjust.” (Frazier, 2023, p. 236) In the case of aesthetic resistance in carceral spaces, these acts involve reclaiming agency which has been taken away by incarceration. Even when these acts may not involve explicit and expressed political consciousness they can be understood, as Frazier describes, as at least involving a vague acknowledgement of the harms of the unjust aesthetic harms they are experiencing. To take on the risk and efforts necessary to engage in aesthetic resistance implies an understanding on some level of the value of these acts in fighting the dehumanization from aesthetic harm. I understand aesthetic resistance in carceral spaces as primarily resisting the dehumanization which comes in part from aesthetic harm and the dehumanization it can contribute to. Engaging in the aesthetic, against the prison’s rules and expectations, means recognizing that even under dehumanizing conditions of unfreedom, you are a human worthy of expressing your creativity, celebrating special occasions, forging relationships, and more. These acts of aesthetic resistance reaffirm your identity and humanity in ways that run counter to the conditions of incarceration which strip people of their individuality and human dignity. This is what makes these acts resistance, not explicit and intentional political messaging conveyed by the act.

Even when incarcerated people like Antwan, Angel, and Vick do not use the terminology that Rubin identifies with resistance (autonomy, rights, justice) to explain what motivates their acts of aesthetic resistance, their understanding of their actions implicates an understanding of these values. Each of them has expressed great dissatisfaction and concern with the severely harsh and too often inhumane conditions which they have been exposed to in carceral spaces. Much of Vick's book is focused on exposing the inhumane treatment of the incarcerated. When he talks about sharing snacks and using food as a tool to reduce violent interactions, he explicitly acknowledges how food and the need to eat connects us in our humanity. He knows that food holds value beyond basic survival requirements for our species, that there is an opportunity for food to have aesthetic and social value. He believes that offering his food creations works for violence harm reduction because it extends a recognition of another's humanity. This connects his acts of aesthetic resistance to his understanding of the conditions of being in prison, including the dehumanization of prison, which sets people up to approach one another with suspicion and fear rather than solidarity and empathy.

The amount of effort and intention that goes into engaging in aesthetic resistance in the highly restrictive carceral environment points to some appreciation for or recognition of the role of agency in these acts. The framing of these acts as merely reactive to natural human impulses does not seem to acknowledge that there is much to plan and devise to enact aesthetic resistance. As Angel describes with the pizza example, it takes months of coordinating with several other men just to fundraise and acquire the supplies necessary to make and cook the prison pizza. It is hard to imagine that there is no recognition of the agency required in making something so complicated to pull off possible under these conditions. Incarcerated people know that they are not allowed to cook their own food or alter their uniforms or repurpose food as pigments for

makeup or drawings. This is made clear to them by the conditions of prison which severely restrict their agency in all ways and the harsh and sometimes unpredictably punitive environment that they live within. The planning, creativity and collaboration necessary to engage in acts of aesthetic resistance demonstrate resistance because they involve explicit reclaiming of agency. The sharing of the food with people who cannot afford to be a part of the process, as Angel describes, also seems to involve a recognition of justice. He feels empathy for the person who is unable to engage in these acts of aesthetic resistance that mean so much to him and he believes that it is only right to extend the benefits of those practices to others who also deserve to eat well (as well as you can within carceral institutions). It is worth noting that I have a better understanding of Orlando and Angel's understanding of these acts because of our personal relationship. In the case of Vick's story, I can read his firsthand account of these acts through his writing. I take Rubin's point that we should not read too much intention into the incarcerated's motivation for their actions, lest we further deprive them of agency. However, the best way to determine the intentions and understandings of the actions of the incarcerated, including acts of aesthetic resistance, may very well be to forge the relationships which make it possible to know their perspective.

The social value of aesthetic resistance inside carceral spaces often signals solidarity. In the case of Vick's use of food to deescalate violence, he recognizes hunger as a unifying force because it is something which all humans are vulnerable to. We all have a common interest in satiating hunger, and sharing a personally crafted snack or meal with someone works towards this common goal. Extending food to someone recognizes this shared humanity. Under the conditions of prison, where the materials, tools and freedom from surveillance to create unsanctioned meals is hard to come by, the act of sharing the meal may have even deeper value

than it would in the outside world. As Vick describes, there can be a reciprocity to these acts. He shares a snack of his creation with a new cellie and in exchange, his new cellie offers him protection from violence. This mutual support towards the interest of surviving time inside points to the possible connection between aesthetic resistance and practicing solidarity.

Aesthetic resistance can demonstrate solidarity through reminding condemned people that they are not alone, even when prison conditions keep them isolated from others. Holman Prison in Alabama recently made headlines for the execution of Kenny Smith, "the first-ever state-sponsored nitrogen gassing of a human being." (Hedgepeth, 2024, n.p.) Journalist Lee Hedgepeth attended the execution and wrote about a practice that the men of Holman's death row have been engaged in for decades: strategically banging on their cell doors to convey solidarity with the condemned on their day of execution.

> As Mills makes his way, shackled, through the prison's hallways, he'll hear it in the air. He may even feel the building shaking through the soles of his feet. His brothers, as many as 160 men who've been condemned by their own government to die, will beat the doors of their cells in a last attempt to let him know: they all stand together. They love together. They live and die together. (Hedgepeth, 2024, n.p.)

Hedgepeth explains that as the condemned are ushered towards death with only prison guards accompanying them, they are deprived of being with loved ones in their final moments. I consider the practice of drumming on the doors to send off a fellow condemned man to be one of aesthetic resistance because it resists the isolation of imprisonment and condemnation to die alone. Hedgepeth describes the act as both a form of solidarity and a message of hope: "As he walked, he heard it — a heartbeat of hope. The banging of the doors. He walked alone, save for the prison guards at his sides. But his brothers were there, too, sharing the sound of solidarity."

Of course, the sense of hope in this example seems to be especially bleak, given the context of Smith's impending execution. Smith may have felt some solace in being less alone in his final moments of life, but clearly this act of aesthetic resistance and solidarity was not enough to free him from death. Yet, I consider the heartbeat of hope to have the potential to transform more than Kenny Smith's last moments of life. The heartbeat of hope, and other examples of aesthetic resistance discussed here, should be heard by people outside of carceral spaces. The power of aesthetic resistance includes the ability to resist the dehumanizing gaze and attitude of people outside of jails or prisons looking in. Hearing the heartbeat of hope is deeply moving.[26] It is devastating. It has the possibility to shatter our dehumanizing assumptions or beliefs about people on the inside. It displays the humanity of people who our society considers to be the worst of the worst, people condemned to death for their accused crimes. The role of hope in this case may have been short-lived for Kenny Smith, but it has the potential to extend outward in time and space to influence our views on the incarcerated and their humanity.

Vick also connects acts of what I call aesthetic resistance to maintaining a sense of hope while doing time. The opening lines in his book *Secrets from a Prison Cell* acknowledge the aesthetic conditions of incarceration: "There are a few seconds each morning where I find myself in complete peace. The moments, just as I am waking up-before I succumb to the realization of my existence. It's the time of the day before the look, the feel, the taste of prison envelops me. In these moments, I am free, and equal to all humanity." (Vick & McRay, 2018, p. vi) This quote speaks to the role of the sensory environment, an aspect of our everyday aesthetic experiences, in reinforcing the dehumanization which incarcerated people suffer from. Vick feels peace only

[26] An audio clip is available here (scroll to the end of the article): https://www.treadbylee.com/p/solidarity.

before the sensory environment of prison infringes upon him, his reminder that he is not only unfree, but also held in a place where he is not considered to have full humanity.

Many incarcerated people describe the longing for sensory experiences that cannot exist within the prison walls as a major source of pain for them during their time on the inside. Acts of aesthetic resistance in carceral spaces attempt to bridge this gap between missing free-world sensations and experiences and the limited or harmful aesthetic experiences available to them inside. Aesthetic resistance that attempts to widen the kinds of aesthetic experiences available to you while incarcerated has been described by the incarcerated as a method for extending hope. The dehumanizing and undignified conditions of incarceration make it difficult to maintain hope, to believe that you are still worthy of a good life, or that you will ever have access to anything like a dignified life again. When you can celebrate a birthday with a cake on the inside, it connects to birthday memories from before incarceration, extends the traditions of celebrating birthdays into the present, and affirms birthdays as something which continues to be worthy of celebration. Again, it's important to note that these acts of aesthetic resistance do not entirely mitigate the harms of incarceration. There are significant risks to participating in these activities, including additional time on your sentence, solitary confinement, and other punitive measures which can be enforced when inmates are violating prison rules in these ways. Still, when "the look, the feel, the taste of prison" are enforcers of dehumanization, it is important for survival to reclaim your humanity through looks, feels, and tastes of your own creation and collaboration. Participating in aesthetic engagement appears to be at least one of the mechanisms for maintaining hope, for giving oneself a shot at meeting partially at least some needs, at replicating in some way what it is like to live in the free world.

In addition to the risk of punishment, there are other potential downsides associated with aesthetic resistance practices in carceral spaces. With so much out of your control, it may feel futile to attempt to express agency, aesthetic or otherwise, under the restrictive conditions of incarceration. Vick recalls periods of his incarceration and life where he was unmotivated to engage in creative projects because of how much it hurt to have those projects taken away. At any moment, people you collaborate with on aesthetic projects may be transferred away, programs which provide materials and support for aesthetic activities may be shut down, and creations may be destroyed by the prison. This constant fluctuation in the conditions of incarceration—the rules, what is available to you, who is available to you, where you are incarcerated, what privileges you are granted in terms of access to programs, etc.—are all a part of undermining aesthetic experience and agency on the inside. Further, even the enforcement of rules and doling out of punishment itself can be highly unpredictable. In some cases, you may be able to engage in aesthetic resistance like uniform altering or unsanctioned food-making for months or years without facing disciplinary action. The erratic enforcement of the rules and the high degree of discretion and power given to correctional officers to choose when and why to administer punishment makes it even more difficult to exercise agency in these conditions.

Angel's game set is helpful for further considering the risks and benefits of aesthetic resistance. Angel created a game of his own based on his memory of the game Monopoly. This highlights again the tendency to recreate something which mirrors the normalcy of life on the outside, a popular game which is not available to play at his prison. The game board includes locations that are personal to Angel, streets named after places he has lived and even a "Holt" street with a big mansion on it, a tribute to our friendship. The game includes three handwritten pages of the "25 basic rules" of the game. The rules diverge greatly from those of the original

game, ranging from how you can move across the board, rules about different modes of transportation and how they work in the game, and my favorite rule: "11. No arguing. Rules are rules. We are not changing rules to make it better for you."[27] The rules express a creativity in going beyond the usual Monopoly conventions and they show some of Angel's humor and personality in predicting how his peers will respond to his 25 basic rules and insisting that they follow them. It took him 4 years to create this game. The amount of time is relevant for understanding not only how limited his access to recreation time and materials was, but also in understanding the difficulty of creating within excessively harmful living conditions. 75% of prison housing in Florida, where Angel is incarcerated, lacks air conditioning.[28] Angel shared that he had to be strategic about the times of year and day he worked on this project to avoid heat exhaustion. To be clear, the dangers of unmitigated heat exposure go far beyond aesthetic harm, but this example demonstrates how heat danger can also contribute to the restriction of aesthetic agency. This also shows us the insufficiency of aesthetic resistance or engagement for countering the harms of prison. While Angel's work on this project led to satisfaction of some aesthetic agency and expression, and allowed him and his peers to play a game not sanctioned by the prison, this practice cannot go far enough in protecting his and others' wellbeing in an institution which neglects to keep them in safe, humane living conditions.

Angel sent me the game in pieces, based on what he could manage to pay postage for. He sent the board, game pieces, and rule sheets separately over the course of months. He told me that he wanted me to have the game so that it could be preserved. He knows all too well the possibility and inevitable likelihood of losing his possessions without advance notice or even a

[27] Rules list written by Jose Angel Vega, received by me on December 27th, 2023, shared with permission.
[28] Kennedy, 2024. Florida is not the only state where incarcerated people are subjected to extreme heat: see also Tuholske et al., 2024.

justification for why they have been taken or destroyed. He sacrificed his ability to play the game in order to preserve his work, work that he sees value in and is proud of. That he must choose between continuing to enjoy the game himself and with others and risk losing it forever or giving up the gameplay in order to ensure its continued existence highlights again the inadequacy of aesthetic resistance to totally regain or retain aesthetic agency and enjoy the benefits of aesthetic engagement with others. On the other hand, Angel is delighted that I possess the game and that my family and I can now play it together. Though it hurts him to give up his work knowing that he cannot trust the prison to keep it safe, he finds further value in sharing the game with me and hearing my thoughts on it. I was also able to send him back pictures of the game, at his request, so that he may have a version of his work available to view even without the full possibility of engaging with the work through gameplay. Our relationship that extends beyond the prison walls is also implicated as a part of his aesthetic resistance in this way.

The relationship between people outside of prison and inside prison can facilitate aesthetic resistance and engagement in many ways. As discussed above, a person on the outside may be a safekeeper of an incarcerated person's creations. Another incarcerated friend of mine, Orlando Romero, frequently sent me his paintings and poetry. He shared these works with me as a part of our friendship, as a way of communicating with me and showing me who he was and how he experienced life on the inside, rather than with the explicit intent for me to protect these items. Devastatingly, Orlando died from COVID-19 after San Quentin Prison, which had zero cases of the disease at the time, knowingly transported 122 prisoners from another institution with an active COVID-19 outbreak to Orlando's ward. (Clarke, 2023) I learned in the aftermath of his death that his possessions, including his paintings, were burned to prevent further outbreak

of the disease. His only surviving artwork has been preserved through his relationships to the outside world.

Orlando and I were pen pals during a time where paper mail was still accepted by prisons in most states.[29] Our ability to exchange physical mail opened up another opportunity for aesthetic resistance. Orlando noticed that one of my letters smelled like my perfume, a vanilla scent that he had not smelled since being free. He asked me to attempt to capture other scents in the pages of my letters so that he could access more smells which were inaccessible to him on death row. I brought letters to the beach in attempt to capture the salty air, tried to bring letters close to steam from a pot of cooking food, and sprayed pages with other perfume scents. Orlando's requests represent an exercise of aesthetic agency which is collaborative across the boundaries of prison. I did my best to give him access to sensory experiences that he was deprived of in prison and in turn, his sensory world was just a little bit freer. He, like many other incarcerated people, would also request pictures of sights he missed seeing while he was locked up. Orlando loved the sky, sunsets and stars, and on death row he rarely had the opportunity to go outside. Angel also requests pictures, and his requests offer insight into what he values and misses about life on the outside. He has requested pictures of a long line at the grocery store, being on the open highway, and going through a carwash. Though these may seem like mundane moments to some, images of these ordinary life occasions help Angel envision himself living as a free man. This demonstrates the role of aesthetic resistance in maintaining a sense of hope that one will ever get to experience a normal, free life again.

Hope provided by aesthetic resistance may further bolster the agency of the incarcerated, resisting the dehumanization of incarceration. Victoria McGeer argues that hope is essential for

[29] Mail scanning, the practice of only allowing paper mail to be received by incarcerated people via a scanned copy of the material, is on the rise and has many negative impacts on the incarcerated and their loved ones. (Wang, 2022)

agency. McGeer defines hope as a "unifying and grounding force of human agency." (McGeer, 2004, p. 100) She argues that it is impossible to live a human life without hope, so we should reframe our questions about the rationality of hope in terms of how we can hope well. She says "To be a full-blown intentional agent—to be a creature with a rich profile of intentional and emotional states and capacities—is to be an agent that hopes…" (McGeer, 2004, p. 101) Basically, she argues that hope is essential for agency because agency requires us to believe in the ability for our intentions and actions to manifest into certain goals or ends. "To live a life devoid of hope is simply not to live a human life; it is not to function—or tragically, it is to cease to function—as a human being." (McGeer, 2004, p. 102) This points to a connection between loss of hope and dehumanization. When the totalizing control of the prison, with its restrictions on agency, aesthetic and otherwise, and subjection to sensory deprivation and overload, impedes your humanity, it also targets your hope. McGeer includes writing from concentration camp survivor Elie Wiesel about the connection between hope and humanity:

> The instincts of self-preservation, of self-defense, of pride, had all deserted us. In one ultimate moment of lucidity it seemed to me that we were damned souls . . . seeking oblivion—without hope of finding it. . . .Within a few seconds, we had ceased to be men. (quoted in McGeer, 2004, p. 101)

Conditions which are so dire as to provoke hopelessness can lead you to lose your humanity. This seems to also be present in the case of incarceration. When Vick discusses holding himself back from engaging in creative practices like aesthetic resistance to avoid the disappointment of losing access to those practices or collaborators, he is expressing a loss of hope that leads his agency, including aesthetic agency, to be further undermined. McGeer further explains the connection between hope and agency:

> I want to suggest that hope is the energy and direction we are able to give, not just toward making the world as we want it to be but also toward the regulation and development of our own agency. In hoping, we create a kind of imaginative scaffolding that calls for the creative exercise of our capacities and so, often, for their development. To hope well is thus to do more than focus on hoped-for ends; it is crucial to take a reflective and developmental stance toward our own capacities as agents—hence, it is to experience ourselves as agents of potential as well as agents in fact. (McGeer, 2004, p. 105)

Aesthetic resistance, understood on my account as an act which combats reduced aesthetic agency that is the result of a power imbalance or injustice, is an exercise in reflecting on and developing one's own capacities as an agent. When aesthetic resistance helps a person remain in touch with or regain a stronger sense of hope, they are fulfilling what McGeer argues is an essential precondition for agency.

McGeer's work also notes the social and communal role of hope. She notes that having others who hold hope for us is essential to maintaining our individual hope. She refers to collective hope as the "hope individuals hold in common with others as hope for the community of which they are a part." (McGeer, 2004, p. 125) This notion of collective hope connects to the examples of solidarity discussed above. In the case of a shared unsanctioned snack, the person sharing their snack creation expresses their own aesthetic agency in creating and choosing who to share the snack with. The recipient of the snack may be able to glean hope from this exchange, feeling seen and cared for in their humanity by the expression of agency from another. In the "heartbeat of hope" example from death row, the solidarity expressed exercises agency in some of the most severely restricted conditions imaginable. Although it didn't stop Kenny Smith's

state-sanctioned homicide, the message of solidarity from his peers expressed collective hope, a message of hope for their shared community.

The goal of this project has been to humanize the incarcerated, a population of people who are gravely mistreated and misunderstood in this country. My account of the aesthetic experiences of the incarcerated adds to the everyday aesthetics literature that emphasizes the moral, political and personal importance of the aesthetic in our daily lives. To humanize the incarcerated, I explored the pathways to their dehumanization. The recognition of aesthetic needs as true needs for human beings implicates our concern that unjust denial of aesthetic needs is harmful. It is harmful to one's humanity when the frequency and intensity of these aesthetic harms are so great that they contribute to a denial of their humanity, or dehumanization. There are, very unfortunately, many examples of aesthetic harms reaching this level of severity in carceral settings. Through the stories of the incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people who have been brave enough to share their stories with us, I have considered in depth how aesthetic harm influences the wellbeing of the incarcerated. I join many scholars, activists and advocates in pointing out that our current approach to punishment is not yielding us a safer or more humane world. On the contrary, the harsh conditions of carceral spaces, rife with aesthetic harm and harm of many other kinds, may be contributing to more violence and harm. My discussion of aesthetic resistance is meant to display the humanity of the incarcerated and how hard they must fight to retain any semblance of human dignity under the most undignified of conditions. In opposition to the popular narratives we hear about criminalized people, incarcerated people engage in practices which demonstrate their creativity, ingenuity, eagerness to connect with and support others, and more. We can and should look to people who have directly experienced incarceration when we

evaluate the efficacy and humanity of our systems of punishment. We cannot fight to change what we do not know about.

As Fleetwood says in the introduction to *Marking Time*, "Prisons—indefinite detention, parole, concentration camps—exist inasmuch as we allow them to." (2020, p. 19) A better world is possible: even and perhaps especially people who have experienced incarceration know this to be true. The excerpt of my first letter from Orlando that I shared in the introduction speaks to this hope. Devastatingly, given that the world has since lost Orlando and all his beautiful wisdom and hope, his last letter to me before his untimely death expresses that same belief in hope and its possibilities. At the time of writing this, it has been almost four years since I received my last letter from Orlando, his last words to me. I carry his message of hope with me every single day and I share it with as many people as I can because I deeply believe in the necessity of hope for change. For everything Orlando has given me, he deserves the last word here:

> Dearest Most Awesome Future Doc! Stephanie,
>
> Well, it's a great time to say the word shit a bunch of times.* First off, the day you were born, the entire world was blessed! You are amazing to me. Really, you are a Light in my life! I <3 you. Hope your family is well. Hi Oma! (Eyes bulging emoji) *Ready? Over 1,113 cases here as of today. I'm fine, really. We have an outbreak! They took 3 of my pals yesterday, 2 more today. One is my neighbor, hope he gets better. Staff are checking us every 4 hours, O^2 Levels, temp, b.p., And I'm good. **A lot going on, the world too, but if we hang on, we will bask in the glory of change.**
>
> Your,
>
> Orlando

My last letter from Orlando, my birthday card, July 11, 2020. The letter was handwritten in a birthday card. I have transcribed it with original spelling and punctuation; emphasis in bold is added by me. Orlando passed away from COVID-19 on August 2, 2020.

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