Popular and visual narratives of punishment in museum settings

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Abstract

Museums tell us a great deal about punishment, both past and present. As storied spaces they 'remember' punishment through accounts of brutality and benevolence; condemnation and compassion; retribution and righteousness. Indeed, these tourist sites offer powerful narratives about crime, but they are also spaces which can problematize concepts such as 'justice', 'tolerance' and 'order'. This chapter will consider the stories Texas tells about the death penalty within the Texas Prison Museum. Drawing on a museum ethnography undertaken in the Lone Star State, it will outline and analyse various narrative features found within this Texan tourist site. More specifically though, this chapter will address the tensions found to be at work within the museum setting and consider how we might begin to explain these as 'counter-narratives' of Texan punishment. As this chapter will argue, museums offer a unique opportunity to understand how a collective narrates its own relationship with criminal justice; they are significant sites in which meanings are made and opinions formed.

Key words: Texas; identity; victimhood; execution; death-penalty; death-row; museum; punishment; offender.

Introduction

The chapter will begin by introducing the reader to Texas as a place of harsh punishment, briefly exploring - from a narrative perspective - the ways in which the Lone Star State is characterised as exceptionally punitive. Then, drawing on ethnographic research undertaken in the Texas Prison Museum, we will consider the Lone Star story of execution past and present. Maybe unsurprisingly the dominant narrative within this museum, celebrated the Texan reputation for harsh justice. However, while the leading story is one of Texan toughness, there were other more subtle stories at work. We find, for example, a display about death penalty abolitionism, an audio exhibit which seems critical of the high number of executions in Texas, and a photographic display that constructs inmates and their families using the scripts of victimhood.

Taken together the humanising politics at work in the displays mentioned above represent a counter-narrative of sorts; they appear to contradict the image of Texas as a place of excessively harsh punishment. It is worth noting though, that counter narratives need not be in complete opposition to more dominant discourses in order to be understood as 'counter'. I am inclined to agree with Bamberg (2004, p.363) when he wrote "there are always certain aspects of dominant stories that are left intact, while others are reshaped and reconfigured" (2004, p.363). As we shall see, these humanising elements do create a discord, but ultimately they are complicit with the

master-narrative of Texan toughness. In other words, these displays do represent a tension within the Texan story of execution, but the pro death penalty narrative is still more persuasive and more pervasive. As we shall find, in its entirety the story of execution in Texas is a story which celebrates the Lone Star approach to execution as tough but also fair.

Telling stories of Texan toughness.

As aforementioned, Texas is often portrayed as a punitive outlier in an already punitive country. Indeed, the phrase *'Don't Mess With Texas'* has gained symbolic significance far beyond the anti-littering campaign for which it was originally written. This story of a unique Texan toughness is also reflected in the academic punishment literature. Garland (2010) suggests that support for capital punishment is 'sustained and enthusiastic in Texas' (p.192); Hammel (2002, p.107) refers to the Texan death penalty as a 'juggernaut', a 'massive inexorable force'; Armstrong and Mills (2003, p.103) suggest executions have become a 'routine occurrence in Texas'; Koch et al (2012, p.150) call Texas the 'public face of execution'; Bessler (2003, p.223) contends that Texas is the only state which 'regularly executes offenders'; McGowen (2011, p.17) explains that Texans demonstrate a particular 'enthusiasm' for harsh punishment; and Judith Randle (2005, p.103) refers to Texas as 'America's death penalty capital'. In short, scholars agree that "Texas reigns supreme in the punishment industry" (Perkinson 2010, p.4).

When we view the findings of this literature from a narrative perspective though, we are inclined to consider not only the story but also the storyteller. This shift in focus – from narration to narrator - reveals something rather interesting. These are primarily stories being told *about* Texas as opposed to stories being told *by* Texas. Within a narrative framework the punishment scholars can be understood as contributing to what Ewick and Sibley (1995, p.197) have termed a 'hegemonic tale'. Together they (re)produce a kind of taken-for-granted story about Texas and its relationship with harsh punishment. While we get a sense of how 'outsiders' view Texan punishment, there is less discussion in the literature about how Texas (and Texans) explain and justify that commitment to tough justice.

This insider/outside dynamic is further illustrated in one of the few books dedicated specifically to local stories about Texan punishment *Prison City: Life with the death penalty in Huntsville Texas* (Massingill and Sohn 2007). The authors interviewed a Public Information Officer for the Texas Department of Correction, asking her about her dealings with the press. She suggested that while foreign and out-of-state reporters arrive with an attitude that Texan prisons are 'out of control', local Texan journalists "understand Texans are not bloodthirsty, let's-hang-um-up-in-the-town-square kind of people". She explained that local reporters are easier to converse with because they "understand Texan laws and the mentality of the people" (Massingill and Sohn 2007, p.82). Scholars are a little like the out-of-town journalists, telling their outsider stories of a tough Texas with little reference to the insider stories which serve to justify support for execution.

Using narrative to justify action

Polkinghorne (1988) and Plummer (1995, p.20-21) suggest people use narratives to 'explain their actions' both to themselves and to others. It can thus be fruitful to enter the 'social realm' of sharing narratives because it is here that "values and interpretations are in the process of being put together"; it is through the telling and sharing of stories that we do 'rhetorical work', convincing

others of our point of view and explaining why we see things this way (Bamberg 2004 p.357). In sum, as individuals we use stories to describe the social world as it is lived by us, the storyteller. Taking this further, Presser (2009, p.190) shows how groups can also tell stories and how these 'narratives of the collective' provide the resources from which to construct the 'narrative of the self'. Any story-of-the-self will thus be embedded within a number of stories told about the collective and when these 'narrative nesting dolls' vocalise together we begin to see a constructed form of collective self-identity (Gubrium and Holstein 2008, p.255). It is in story-worlds like the Texas Prison Museum that the Lone Star State is sharing its narratives of penal practice.

By placing what we have learned about Texan punishment in the context of narrative then, we have revealed something of a gap within this punishment literature, an untold story so to speak. In this chapter we will be exploring the narratives (and counter-narratives) of Texan punishment, but we shall do so by exploring the stories *Texas tells* about punishment. The stories *of* - as opposed to *about* - the collective will be our starting point. It is these insider stories which can "take us beyond surface facts or statistics" *about* Texan punishment and "reveal the social world on its own terms" (Gubrium and Holstein 2008, p.478). Texas is telling its own punishment stories, we just need to look and to listen.

The analyses which follow were informed by ethnographic observations from within The Prison Museum in Huntsville, Texas. As part of the research I visited other punishment-relevant tourist sites and conducted interviews with staff and volunteers in each of these sites. It is not within the scope of this chapter to discuss the methodological peculiarities of conducting a museum ethnography, although I have published about this elsewhere (please see Thurston 2017). Similarly, this chapter will focus specifically on the stories told in the Texan Prison Museum about execution. For discussion of Texas punishment stories more broadly, please see: *Prisons and Punishment in Texas: culture, history and museological representation* (Thurston 2016).

The remainder of this chapter then, is dedicated to the story of execution as told by The Texas Prison Museum in Huntsville. We will encounter a number of relevant displays, and I shall discuss each in the order that visitors find them; an order which begins with what Stone (1996) might refer to as a 'dark tourism product' - the electric chair.

Death by electrocution

As an object the electric chair is placed in a theatrical setting. The lighting is much more subdued than in the rest of the museum, but the chair still casts a long shadow upon the floor. The chair is housed within a replica of the Walls Unit execution chamber. It is surrounded by three brick walls, one of which includes a door and window that serve no function. The chair is protected by both waist-high glass and security ropes (figure 1).

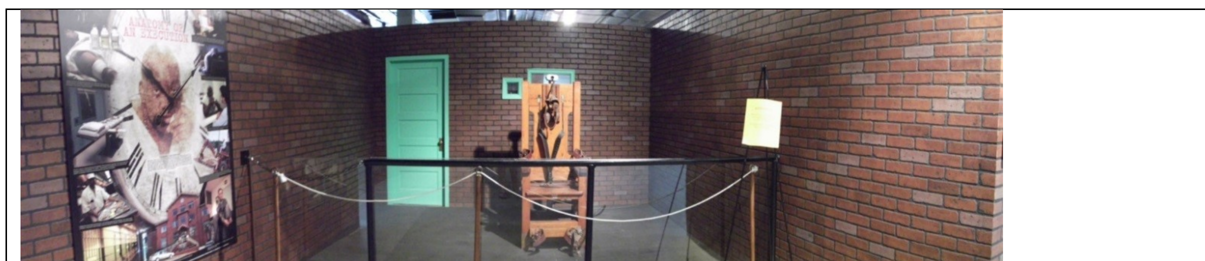

Figure 1

RESEARCH NOTES: "Most become quiet as the electric chair enters their view, almost respectful as they gaze at it and one assumes imagine its destructive force. A sense of unease seems to surround many of the adult visitors, helped by the security measures which add gravitas to a setting that scarcely needs it. They become awkward; their eyes shifting away from what they are here to see; their bodies moving away faster than their morbid curiosity seems to desire. Yet they always glance back; one last glimpse of what might be an uncomfortable reminder of their own mortality"

It is difficult to understand or explain exactly why people react in the way they do to what is essentially an inanimate object. It is as though the chair – as an object rather than image – holds captive those whose lives it has taken; death clings to the air around it. In line with Smith's (2008) findings, within the museum context the chair-as-object possesses 'an auratic quality ... bestowed by death' (p.162). Moreover, the chair is also symbolic of a less modern, less civilised era in American penal history (Brandon, 1999, Smith 2008, Garland 2010). Within the museum, the glass wall and ropes which protect the chair encourage the audience to see it as mysterious, but also antiquated. Making the object 'untouchable' ensures it retains elements of the unknown while also emphasizing its position in the past (Pearce 1994); not just an object, the museum presents the chair as an artefact.

Figure 2

The chair-as-object is accompanied by a poster which includes an image (figure 2). The image is black and white as opposed to colour, grainy as opposed to defined; set purposely in the past. As Wells (2000) suggests this type of image is often used in museums because it acts as a 'guarantor of authenticity'. That is, the audience will 'read' the image as a snapshot of a past reality. Moreover, the text on the poster refers to the chair as *'Old Sparky'* and to electrocution as *'Riding the Thunderbolt'.* On the one hand this language contrasts with the chair-as-object because it adds a

more comical tone to the capital punishment display. Yet on the other hand, nick-naming the chair is also nostalgic and thus serves to re-establish the chair's position in the past (Smith 2008). However, while the chair's story is no doubt told in past tense that is not to suggest it is a forgotten story. The electric chair continues to feature in cultural products and cultural stories even today. As an image the chair has featured in blockbuster movies (see Sarat 2001); in bestselling novels (see Owen and Ehrenhaus 2010); in an Andy Warhol exhibition (see Capers 2006) and even as part of the stage design at Madonna's world tour (see Smith 2008). More than just an object or image; the electric chair has achieved an iconic status within other culture industries.

That said, within the context of the museum, the electric chair and accompanying poster together place the story of execution by electrocution in the past. The aesthetics of the chair and the space around it make it an artefact; something of a bygone era. Yet the chair is the beginning of a chronological narrative about execution. The next instalment of that narrative is the story of death by lethal injection.

Death by lethal injection

Figure 3

There is another poster next to the chair entitled "Anatomy of an Execution" which is about death by lethal injection (figure 3). It includes a clock face, with an image of an executed inmate – Willie Pondexter – at its centre. Around the edges of the clock are images and text relating to the tasks undertaken before, during and after an execution. In contrast to the nostalgic tone of the electric chair's story, using 'Anatomy' in the title associates lethal injection with the scientific and the medical. The word no doubt has nuanced connotations of death, but not the painful gruesome death often associated with electrocution. While the death penalty continues to generate emotionally charged debate in the political, social and cultural spheres, the use of the word 'anatomy', accompanied by the clock face serve to diffuse that emotionality by portraying lethal injection as a routine, perfectly timed series of predictable events.

Garland (2010) suggests official discourse makes every attempt to 'de-sensationalise' the event of an execution, and that correctional officers are trained to be as precise as humanly possible to reduce the likelihood of a 'spectacle'. The aim is to make modern execution a 'non event' (Zimring and Hawkins 1989, p.120). Entitling the poster about lethal injection '*Anatomy of an execution*' can be understood as achieving that same goal. Indeed, even the positioning of the needles in the museum

reflects this same sentiment. No mock execution chamber, no gurney, the needles are instead placed in the bottom of cabinet which is actually dedicated to other things.

The cabinet which contains the replica needles also displays various objects associated with two inmates; Karla Faye Tucker and Gary Graham, both of whom were executed. There is no overt explanation as to why these cases were contested, but some controversy is implied by the abolitionist tone of the objects within the cabinet. The museum's story of modern execution (in the form of replica needles) is thus somewhat confusingly entwined with the museum's brief story about two controversial cases which resonated with the abolitionist movement.

One half of this 'abolitionist' cabinet is dedicated to the case of Karla Faye Tucker. For the purpose of contextualisation (although not stated within the cabinet) Tucker's case caused public debate due - in part - to statements of remorse she made while in prison, which were underpinned by a religious conversion (Kudlac 2007). This part of the display includes a 'stop executions' banner made by the Texas Coalition against the death penalty, and a poster made by an anti-death penalty group in Copenhagen. The text under the photograph of Tucker states that "Tucker was executed in 1998 for murdering two people with a pickaxe".

The other half of the cabinet is dedicated to Gary Graham, who is depicted using his mug shot. For the purposes of contextualisation (although not stated within the cabinet) Graham's case received public attention because of the 'questionable character' of a key witness who was later found guilty of a separate murder. The objects within this side of the cabinet include a noose and a burnt American flag. The text beneath Graham's picture states he was "sentenced to die by lethal injection for robbing and murdering a man ... Graham had also been charged in ten separate robberies and suspected in two shootings, ten car thefts, eight more shootings, and the rape of 57-year old women".

This cabinet is actually very interesting from a narrative perspective. While it may at first appear to be representing an abolitionist argument, the objects within the cabinet are all symbolically charged in ways which suggest otherwise. Put another way, when read together, these objects tell a specific story about abolitionists. The burnt American flag offers the suggestion that abolitionists (whatever their nationality) are unpatriotic and the noose seems to imply that abolitionists associate the modern death penalty either with legal hangings or illegal lynchings. On closer inspection we realise this cabinet does not actually give any abolitionist argument and thus no real counter *narrative* exists here. We are offered no reason to oppose the executions of Graham or Tucker, or to question the use of the death penalty more generally. Indeed, the pro-death penalty viewer is offered a retributive justification to *support* the executions, based on the severity of the crimes. In other words, while this cabinet might appear to contain a counter narrative to Texan toughness, a more nuanced reading of the cabinet as a storied space reveals a lack of any coherent abolitionist argument.

Audio exhibit: Witness to an execution

The next instalment within the Texas Prison Museum's capital punishment exhibit is an audio recording, emitted from a small display entitled *'Witness to an Execution'.* The audio is a mixture of music and people speaking. The spoken word sections are delivered by correctional officers, spiritual advisors, associated press, and an ex-warden Jim Willet. It is clear from listening that those officers trained in execution find the process harrowing, yet the voices tell us something else too. In one part

of the audio, each person states how many executions they have witnessed. Purposefully repetitive this section seems to encourage the listener to consider (if not outright question) the Texan commitment to harsh punishment.

"Bam, bam, bam, do 3 a year that's one thing . Do 35 a year - that's a lot"

"... I have been with 114 people at the time of their execution".

"... I've participated in and witnessed approximately 120 executions".

"... I've witnessed approximately 170 executions".

"I have been a participant in thirty-one executions".

"I witnessed fifty-two executions".

"Probably somewhere in the neighbourhood of 115 executions".

"Approximately 105, 110 executions".

"Thirty-six or thirty-seven executions".

"130 executions".

"I've witnessed 162 executions by lethal injection in the state of Texas"

"What will I say when I see God? I wrestle with myself about the fact that it's easier now and was I right to make part of my income from watching people die?"

Yet possibly the most poignant section within this audio comes later, when the witnesses describe the execution itself. According to Sarat (2001) the execution scene in death penalty movies often places the audience as a 'voyeur to someone else's voyeurism' and listening to the audio places the tourists in a similar position. However, death penalty movies tend to involve the victim and the crime (swapping between an image of the gurney and an image of the murder) but the museum's audio does not. Rather, the interviewees turn our attention to the offender and the offender's family. Conversely, it is these people who are presented as the unlikely 'victims'.

"I had a mother collapse right in front of me; we were standing virtually shoulder to shoulder. I've seen them fall into the floor, totally lose control. You'll never hear

another sound like a mother wailing whenever she's watching her son be executed. Yet, how do you tell a mother that she can't be there in the last moments of her son's life?"

"Some of them are very calm, some of them are upset, some of them cry ... usually in about 20 seconds, he's completely strapped in ... After all the straps are done they look you in the eye and they tell you thank you for everything you've done. It's kind of a weird thing ... A lot of inmates apologise ... I know that at times they know when it's happening to them. One in particular I can remember, he said 'I can taste it'"

Unlike Brown's (2009, p.144) conclusions about other penal tourist sites, this exhibit does not 'look away' from the act of punishing; the 'distance' between the visitor and the condemned is never smaller than it is when listening to this recording. Rather than presenting a 'vague unease' about the act of punishing (Brown 2009), the disquiet of the execution team and those whose job it is to witness an execution is clear and explicit.

The shift of focus onto the offender and his family as victims, along with the morbid tone means this display might be read as a counter-narrative to Texan toughness, as an audience we are asked to question the morality of execution. However, as Bamberg (224) suggests, counter narratives can still draw strength from master narratives. It is worth remembering that this audio is not heard in isolation, it is instead part of what I have elsewhere described as a 'modernisation motif' (see Thurston 2016). It is one aspect of a bigger museum story in which execution is presented as sterilised, medicalised and civilised. Lest we forget the differences between the portrayal of death by electrocution and death by lethal injection. Indeed, certain elements of the audio do seek to re-establish the storied construction of the lethal injection as bringing about a more peaceful (de-sensationalised) death.

".. then we'll say its time, and so they will unlock the cell, and he's not handcuffed or chained, and he and I will walk into the chamber"

"one man who wanted to sing Silent Night, he made his final statement and then after the warden gave the signal he started singing Silent Night and he got to the part 'round yon virgin mother and child' and just as he got 'child' out - was the last word"

"The people inside, watching, they are invariably quiet"

"It's very quiet, it's extremely quiet. You can hear every breath everyone takes around you"

So, the audio in its entirety is quite complex in comparison to the rest of the death penalty exhibit. On the one hand it appears somewhat critical of the Texan commitment to execution ("you do 35 a year, and that's a lot") while also positioning the inmate/inmate's family as victims ("you'll never hear another sound like a mother wailing"). Yet on the other hand, it portrays the execution as a quiet event ("you can hear every breath") and portrays the inmate's death as somehow civilised ("he's not handcuffed or chained"). In short, while the audio does represent a tension of sorts, it does little to undermine the more dominant story in which Texan punishment is tough but also fair. This is a counter-narrative which – in Bamberg's words - has been 'carefully managed' in order to "leave intact, and be complicit with, other existing (master) plot lines" (2004, p.362). There is though, one space in the museum which is more overtly critical of Texan execution. Here I am referring to a photographic display entitled *The Forgotten Victims of Crime*

Photographic display: The Forgotten Victims of Crime

Within the Texas Prison Museum, there is a photographic exhibit which consists of is sixteen photographs in two rows of eight (figure 4 and 5). One side are pictures of (and statements made by) family members of murder victims. The other includes images of (and statements made by) family members of people who have been executed. At one end is a statement from the artist, in which she describes the families of those who have been executed as the "forgotten victims of crime". Within the statement she also explains why she felt the need to undertake the project:

Figure 4

Figure 5

> *"I started thinking about the families' execution leaves behind ... It really is a moving conversation to speak with a parent, any parent, who has lost a child"*

Within the artist's statement both 'sets' of families – of the victim and of the executed - are seen to be suffering. This sense of symmetry is also reflected in the composition of the exhibit (the

photographs are identically framed, and they stand back-to-back) and in the similarity of sentiment within the written statements (both sets of families speak about their grief). This stylistic composition compels the audience to confront the contradiction that the family of the executed could be afforded victimhood status; they too have suffered a loss. One mother, whose son was murdered, makes this quite clear in her own statement:

"Yolanda's pain was the same as mine. A son is a son. It doesn't matter whether you lose them as a victim or a criminal. The pain is the same".

In Chapter 8 of this book, S*ympathies and Scandals: (Counter-) Narratives of Criminality and Policing in Inter-war Britain*, John Carter Wood explains how newspapers in 1920s Britain deployed narrative strategies to humanise the condemned. These strategies included: showing photographs of the condemned often with family members; and interviewing people close to the offender. The museum's photographic display (and the audio exhibit discussed earlier) could be interpreted as performing a similar function. Inviting the audience to see the offender as a brother, a son, a father, these displays – at least on the surface - humanise the men waiting to die. Indeed, the photographic display might even be seen by some tourists as abolitionist in tone, as an attempt to make them question the death penalty from a moral perspective. The underlying message is that execution makes victims of innocent people. But will every patron to the museums view the executed man's family as 'innocent'? Maybe not.

Christie (1996) has discussed how those who are easily awarded victimhood status tend to be viewed as in no way deserving of their victimisation; they are the 'ideal' victims. In contrast non-ideal victims have some connection to their victimisation. They might include sex workers who are raped, drunk people who have been mugged, or victims who have a criminal record. The family of the executed may not be perceived by everyone as having a legitimate claim to victimhood status. The photographic exhibit can thus be interpreted as both a story about ideal victims (the murder victim's family) and non-ideal victims (the executed man's family). As Christie (1996) might predict, reactions to the display and to the implicit plea for victimhood status did vary dramatically.

RESEARCH DIARY: Some visitors appeared moved by the suffering, others were angry that victimhood recognition had been awarded at all. Of all the displays, this one seemed to generate the most debate from the museum visitors; some people seemed to see a friction between the two 'types' of victim. I heard one visitor describe it as 'a disgusting attempt [by the executed men's' families] to get sympathy'.

Plus, the display does speak in a language understood by death penalty advocates. For example, one statement made by Mike Miller (the son of a murder victim) reads: "My sister and I were robbed of the opportunity to know our dad and have him be part of our lives". This, along with other emotional accounts of continued suffering from ideal victims will likely appeal to the pro-death penalty audience. However, the overriding tone of this exhibit is *not* pro-death penalty. Unlike other

displays in the capital punishment collection, it *does not* celebrate the reputation of Texan toughness; it *does not* construct execution as tough but fair; and it *does not* surround the punishment of death with any kind of cultural nostalgia. We have already discussed how the artist's statement - along with the stylistic symmetry of the exhibit - invites the audience to at least consider the possibility that execution makes innocent victims of offender's families. There are though, more explicit anti-death penalty arguments at work within this photographic exhibit.

Somewhat surprisingly the abolitionist argument in this display is more pervasive and more persuasive than anything we found in the cabinet containing the abolitionist paraphernalia. For example, one statement made by Darryl Bell – whose cousin was executed in 2010 - raised a number of questions about the 'bias' within a 'broken system' including ineffective council. And it is not just the so-called 'non-ideal' victims who question the legitimacy of execution within this museum story. Claudia Beseda-Burns (daughter of murder victim Elizibeth Beseda) states "I don't believe in capital punishment. I've never felt anyone had the right to take another person's life".

So, while this exhibit does employ some pro-death penalty language, in its entirety the display is not pro-execution. Had the artist or the museum chosen only to include statements and images of the murder victims' families, then this exhibit would have been interpreted very differently. As a story it would have presented a compelling argument to support harsh punishment based on the traditional victimhood scripts of suffering. Yet allowing the families of the executed to grieve alongside the families of the murdered creates a tension within the narrative of Texan toughness. The extent to which it should be read as an explicit, free standing counter-narrative though is up for debate. As we saw, the display did also speak the language of death penalty advocates, albeit briefly. Moreover, while the exhibit might have sought to humanise the family of the condemned, the inmates themselves were not the lead characters within this arguably abolitionist story.

There were though, other parts of the museum which did seek to humanise the offenders. Rather than portraying Texan prisons in terms of Texan toughness, this collection of displays instead told a story in which correctional facilities are civilised (maybe even civilising) spaces.

Humanising those in custody

The final cabinets I would like to discuss relate to the inmates themselves and their time in custody. The Texas Prison Museum has several cabinets filled with inmate arts and crafts (figures 6, 7, 8 and 9). These include, amongst other things, a display about female death row inmates and their quilt/doll making, a large display of inmate carpentry and an exhibit explaining how prisoners train guide dogs for soldiers returning from war. While not all of these objects relate specifically to those awaiting execution, the audience are nevertheless encouraged to assume some inmates pose only a very minor threat. They have, after all, been given access to saws, needles, scissors and animals. The museum also sells leather goods in the gift shop crafted by inmates. The tourist is thus invited to take the narrative of the reformed (even civilised) prisoner home with them. Showing the souvenir to their friends and family or giving it as a gift, this story of the prison and the prisoner will likely loop and spiral far beyond the museum.

Figure 6

Figure 7

Figure 8

Figure 9

To be clear within many of the other displays, inmates were characterised as dangerous, animalistic, ruthless and cunning. As we might expect given the Texan enthusiasm for punitive punishment, there were stories about contraband weapons, violent escapes and murdered prison officers. All of which will remind the museum visitor that prisoners (past and present) pose a very real threat. People incarcerated were most certainly portrayed as violent and unpredictable, capable of the most heinous acts. However, as we have seen, that is not to suggest the museum was completely devoid of humanising instances. This dual inmate identity of 'dangerous/criminal' and 'reformed/humanised' means the prison film is arguably the closest match to that offered in the museum. Most prison movies do attempt to humanise at least some of the prisoners within the narrative, while simultaneously portraying other prisoners as highly dangerous. However, in prison movies the lead character is often innocent and at times even portrayed as a hero (Bennett 2006). This is not the case in the museum. Humanizing politics work to make the reformed inmate appear 'civilised' and the prison as 'civilising', but that is not to say inmates are ever portrayed as innocent or heroic.

Moreover, in prison films the crimes committed by the lead character tend to be non-violent or perpetrated many years ago (Mason 2006). What are less common then are cultural stories that work to humanize real life offenders who have committed recent, heinous crimes. In short, what we rarely see is humanizing politics at work in cultural stories told about death row inmates. similar to the set of narrative strategies some newspapers used to report on condemned murderers in 1920s Britain (see Wood While uncommon, one significant attempt has been made to represent guilty death row inmates as reformed characters, and thus shares some similarities with the humanising politics we have found to be at work within the Texan Prison Museum. The Benetton advertising campaign entitled 'We on Death Row' used images of - and statements made by - convicted killers

awaiting execution on death rows across America (see Girling 2004). The campaign received much negative press, particularly in the Southern States. According to Kraidy and Goeddertz (2004) it was the partiality in the narrative that caused the controversy; there was no victim voice. Whilst a previous Benetton campaign which used a picture of the electric chair had gone relatively unnoticed by victim advocate groups, by contrast the 'We on Death Row' billboards sparked national and international debate. Benetton were accused of 'sympathising with murderers' (Kraidy and Goeddertz 2004). There are clearly similarities here with our museum narrative, although there are also some important differences to note as well.

Firstly, the museum story is not partial in the same way. The voices of victimhood are represented elsewhere in the museum (in the photographic exhibit, discussed earlier) as is the 'dangerous criminal' identity (in the form of the contraband cabinets, escape attempts and memorials to those who have died in the line of duty). Secondly, 'We on Death Row' used direct quotations to humanize the inmates. Here the audience was encouraged to hear the offenders' stories through their own words, and by extension to judge the offenders' claims of reform. Our museum story replaces words with objects. Displaying inmate artwork, leatherwork, carpentry and tapestry does still represent an attempt to humanize the inmates, to make them appear 'civilised', but it also serves to silence the inmate voice. Rather than a declaration of reform from the prisoner's mouth (as in the Benetton campaign), these are implicit assertions made by the museum. By *implying* the reform narrative through non-verbal communicative gestures, the museum will likely sidestep much of the controversy associated with Benetton. There is no 'face' staring back at the audience asking for forgiveness and the tourist does not 'see' the condemned and in turn are not 'seen by' the condemned. The dynamics of spectatorship are entirely different.

The third difference between the museum and the 'We on Death Row' campaign is arguably the most significant, in that the museum's reform narrative is able to comfortably co-exist with the more dominant story of Texan toughness. Whereas Benetton was seen as humanizing inmates in an attempt to generate support for abolition, the museum humanizes but offers no such suggestion or argument. For example, dolls made by the 'women of death row' are exhibited in the museum and we are told they were made 'twenty years ago', but that is all. These women (we presume) have either been executed or are still awaiting execution. The museum humanises the inmates but unlike the Benetton campaign it does so without making them part of an argument in favour of death penalty abolition. In summary, there is no suggestion anywhere in the museum that the reformed inmate should not be executed, or that any inmate, however dependable or responsible, should receive a reduction in sentence.

Taking this collection of displays together then, we see that the museum removes its humanising stories from wider debates about the appropriateness of execution by avoiding them entirely. As a storied space it ultimately allows the audience to see the inmates as reformed, but still supporting their execution/harsh punishment. These narratives about reformed inmates are thus not in competition with any narrative about how 'good behaviour' might signal a reduction in punishment. The reformed inmates are awarded privileges (such as access to carpentry tools) but the audience can view this reform as a personal journey. Within these stories, 'good behaviour' will have no impact of an inmate's death sentence or the length of time they will be in prison. In other words, while the inclusion of humanizing politics does again represent a tension, it nevertheless exists alongside the more dominant master plot of Texan toughness. Visitors can leave the Prison Museum

confident that in Texas, good behaviour will not result in a reduction in sentence. Inmates can be humanised without them becoming characters in an abolitionist story.

Conclusion

Texas has a worldwide reputation for harsh - even excessive - judicial punishment; the story of Texan toughness in the penal sphere is a master narrative of sorts. Yet for the most part this notoriety is founded on 'outsider' stories told *about* Texas as opposed to 'insider' stories told *by* Texas. The aim of this chapter then, was to delve into some of the stories that Texas was telling about *its own* relationship to punishment. In other words, this chapter has demonstrated one way in which we – as cultural punishment scholars – can analyse popular narratives of punishment to greater understand the meanings which surround penal practices in localised contexts.

More specifically, we began by examining how the meanings which surround electrocution differ from those which surround lethal injection. Here we found the museum embraced the powerful symbolism of the chair, while at the same time making the needles a kind of 'non-event'. Moreover, by placing the past alongside the present, the visitor is encouraged to read the punishment narrative temporally, as a story about modernisation. In other words, by juxtaposing the old against the new, the site ultimately offers a narrative of Texan progress. As visitors we learn that while execution in Texas was once delivered using 'Old Sparky', it is now more civilised, more sanitised, some might argue more humane.

This portrayal of Texan punishment as [comparatively] humane can be read as a counter narrative to the 'outsider' story in which the Lone Star State is portrayed as excessively harsh. Indeed, by entering the Texas Prison Museum as a story-world we found Texas telling various stories which together had the potential to destabilise the more dominant discourse of Texan toughness. For example, the audio exhibit invited us to question the Texan enthusiasm for execution; the photo exhibit seemed to make the offender and their family into victims and there were several cabinets (including those in the gift shop) which displayed inmate artwork, carpentry and dolls/tapestry. All of these humanised the inmates to varying degrees, disrupting and disturbing the image of prison as a dangerous place filled with dangerous people. However, as Bamberg (2004) suggests, introducing 'counter characters' [in this case humanised prisoners] need not mean a complete rejection of the mater-narrative [in this case Texan toughness]. Rather "these counter characters have to be … carefully managed in order to leave intact, and be complicit with, other existing (master) plot lines" (Bamberg 2004, p.362). As we saw, Texas did deploy humanising scrips when portraying prisoners, but within the Lone Star story-world, these humans were still deserving of tough punishment.

In conclusion, it is my hope this chapter provides some food for thought. Punishment related museums and other tourist sites offer a unique opportunity to understand how a collective narrates its own relationship with criminal justice; as narrative environments they are significant sites in which meanings are made and opinions formed. This chapter is thus an invitation of sorts. Narrative criminologists are well placed to examine the stories being told about crime and punishment in cultural spaces of public memory, and to contribute to this growing body of interdisciplinary scholarship. Tourist sites are storied spaces which offer us a unique opportunity to examine the meanings which surround punishment, and this I would suggest is an opportunity not to be missed.

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