Teaching Art and the History of Tattoos at Rikers Island: An Interview with Tamara Santibanez

Lisa Jean Moore

An interview with Tamara Santibanez, who teaches art and the cultural and social history of tattoos to youth offenders at Rikers Island prison, explains how tattoos can help develop visual literacy and explores tattooing's potential to empower inmates both personally and professionally.

Arts programs in jails and prisons support the therapeutic, developmental, and vocational goals of incarcerated persons. Artists are uniquely positioned to help prisoners express their identities, address trauma, and develop skills that will help them survive once they are released. The most robust and longest-lasting programs in the United States are in urban correctional institutions, which have easy access to working artists who want to volunteer and funders who will support the programs, and tend to hire urban staff who reflect demographics similar to those of the inmates.

New York City's Rikers Island, the city's main jail complex, is located in the East River and currently houses about 9,000 inmates. Rikers hosts a range of arts programs. The Creative Arts Therapy program, funded primarily by ThriveNYC, includes 12 therapists and offers classes three times a week to 8 to 10 people per session (New York Health and Hospitals Corporation 2018). The Center for Justice at Columbia University runs a Rikers Education Program[1] that provides educational opportunities to inmates who are 16 to 21 years old, including graphic design, music production, and poetry and hip-hop. The Stella Adler School of Acting[2] teaches hundreds of inmates each year. The REFRAME program[3] teaches inmates about contemporary art and exposes them to jobs and job training. Tamara Santibanez, interviewed here, is among the working artists teaching at Rikers.

Multimedia artist Tamara Santibanez[4] has been tattooing for nine years and currently works at Saved Tattoo[5] in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. Her artwork draws upon queer fetish iconography and Chicanx imagery. While getting a new tattoo, I interviewed Tamara about her work teaching art and the cultural and social history of tattoos at Rikers Island.

Lisa Jean Moore: *Tell me about how you got involved at Rikers.*

Tamara Santibanez: The shop where I work, Saved Tattoo, forwarded me an email from a woman who was the Youth Offender Art Programming coordinator. She was trying to set up tattoo-related programming for 18- to 21-year-olds at Rikers. I ended up going to do a one-day workshop to see what it was like. I had not taught before very much, and definitely not at any correctional facility.

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1 See: https://centerforjustice.columbia.edu/education/rikers-education-program.

2 Website: https://stellaadler.com/outreach/rikers-island.

3 See: https://lydiakutko.com/reframe.

4 Website: https://tamarasantibanez.com.

5 Website: www.savedtattoo.com.

The first class I taught was in what I was told was the unofficial gay and trans housing unit, and I really loved it. I started doing regular classes every other week; I have been doing it for the last two years.

LJM: *When you first went, was it jobs training for young offenders for when they got out? Or was it an art class?*

TS: It was just meant to be art. More recently, we are trying to revamp the class so it is more of a vocational program. We can't do tattooing, obviously, but I am able to share useful knowledge for people interested in potentially getting into the industry.

LJM: *What is a typical class like?*

TS: I teach what they call "youth offenders," which are 18- to 21-year-olds. I have only worked with young men at Rikers Island. A lot of it is discussion-based. There is drawing, obviously. I had that idea that in any jail or prison there was a lot of tattooing going on, which isn't the case at Rikers. I think that might be part of the reason they allow tattoo-related programming, since tattooing is not really an institutional concern there, at least from what I have seen.

A lot of my students don't consider themselves artists necessarily, haven't done much drawing, and are a little nervous to draw. Most haven't done a tattoo. It is very back-to-the-basics. I start by talking with them about how I got into tattooing, because I was self-taught initially and then ended up getting into a shop. Many of my students have been tattooed at friends' houses or at more DIY shop spaces, or at tattoo parties. I like to show them my work and describe its origins so that they have a sense of how I started on my own and then was able to professionalize.

I also try to emphasize to them that tracing can be a very valuable tool, especially with tattoo design. You are more often than not working with a preexisting set of images. There are classic designs and client reference. People have this sense that tattoo artists draw everything they do out of their heads and that is not true at all—we have to look at images, especially if we are tattooing things that we are not already familiar with.

LJM: *So do you think you are teaching them visual literacy?*

TS: Yeah, I think the most important thing that I try to emphasize beyond classical drawing skills is how to build and compose an image. And how to honor your intent in that. Tattooing is so symbolic. That is an important aspect of it and something I try to impress upon them and get them to discuss. What does it mean to put an image on your body that other people are going to be seeing? What does that communicate to other people? If you think about it in those terms, then it can become an empowering process—talking about culturally different types of tattoos, and how the same image can have many different meanings depending on who is looking at it.

For example, we will talk about a rose. One person will say a rose means love and romance; you give flowers to your girlfriend, it is a thing of beauty. Someone else will say not at all: a rose means death because it is a cut flower and it is going to wilt. You bring roses to someone's grave. I like to build a class around these discussions of tattoo images and trying to parse meaning in tattoos, their symbols and language.

LJM: *What type of questions do the students ask?*

TS: They ask a lot about getting tattooed. They ask a lot about what things mean. I'm coming from a traditional tattoo-shop background, and I live in New York City, where the style of Americana tattooing is really popular.

LJM: *What is Americana tattooing?*

TS: It's what people think of when they think of Sailor Jerry tattooing—simple drawings. It comes from sailors, the military, circus performers. It's characterized by bold outlines, a limited palette of

mainly primary colors, images of things like women and clipper ships and eagles. A lot of tattooers tend to consider this sort of the standard style.

But that is not true for the majority of people getting tattooed, especially not for my students. They have different cultural backgrounds and the style just doesn't resonate with many of them. They wonder why someone would want something that is drawn so crudely. I really love hearing their perspectives. They have really incredible instincts about what makes a tattoo good and what makes a tattoo bad. I try to bring in things not just to model their own work after, but for them to critique and share what they think is successful or unsuccessful about designs. I want them to develop their own taste.

LJM: *What do you think of Rikers as an institution? Is there a lot of surveillance of you?*

TS: I find there is a lot of openness and receptiveness of programs. I really appreciate the opportunity of being able to work there because I see the way tattoos are heavily policed at other institutions. Even when people are arrested, their tattoos are photographed for gang files. Tattoos that are not necessarily gang-related will be classified as such. They have some posters at Rikers that are about identifying gang members and it includes tattoo examples, and a lot of it is very generic tattoo imagery like the Virgin of Guadalupe. A lot of the images I have here on my wall would be considered gang tattoos by police standards, so I think it would be really easy for the guards to enforce that if they so chose. But the officers are encouraging and permissive of the materials that I bring in to share and understand the artistic value.

LJM: *Are the guards tattooed also?*

TS: Yeah, we actually have a lot of conversations about tattoos that they want to get and I give them info for the shop that I work at or suggest other artists. Tattooing is a pretty major common ground. A lot of the officers that work there are very empathetic. I think New York is a place where there is so much intersection and overlap of communities, racially and culturally, and a lot of the people who are officers at Rikers are from the same neighborhoods that are incarcerated there. I imagine it is very different than a different facility out of the city where a majority of the incarcerated population are people of color with white officers who are from rural areas.

LJM: *In your ideal world, what would be a great program if you had to design a program for Rikers?*

TS: My dream would be to design a vocational program around tattooing. Ideally, it would create a tattoo shop where people could learn to tattoo on the inside, then transition into professional careers on the outside. I see there being a few tiers. The first class would be all drawing-based. The second class would be more about the business of tattooing. That would cover licensing requirements, how to build a portfolio, how to get into the industry. The day-to-day business of running a shop and being a small-business owner. Assessing how the tattoo industry works, how it should grow. Another thing I would really like to do is to partner people with mentors on the outside once they are released, to shadow in a shop setting or to apprentice to tattoo.

LJM: *What are the obstacles to that?*

TS: Well, I know there is a group in Canada that has actually done it. They are called PASAN.[6] They do Hep[atitis] C and HIV education and support in prison and part of that is covering safer tattooing and piercing practices. They distribute pamphlets on tattooing safely within correctional facilities there. I was told by one of the folks from the organization that Canadian prisons are required by law to provide clean syringes and clean tattoo needles. He was saying that they had started this pilot program to open two tattoo shops and that it was going well, but then the funding was pulled and they had to close.

[6] Website: www.pasan.org.

I think the biggest concern is safety around needles or other equipment potentially being used as weapons. A potential positive is that a regulated tattoo shop could actually be a constructive solution to reducing the spread of Hep C inside in prison, from a public-health perspective.

Another barrier I see is that people perceive tattoos, especially within prison spaces, as being purely signifiers of criminality or bad behavior. So much of the narrative around what tattooing looks like in carceral spaces is about hate symbols or gang tattoos, or generally tattoos that are regrettable—tattoos that should be removed when you get out.

I have conversations with my students to attempt to reinforce the positives about their tattoos. I also ask them about how those tattoos might function differently outside of Rikers. So, for example, if a student showed me that he had a tattoo of his younger sister's name, then I might say, "That tattoo tells me a lot about you and how family is important to you. Can you tell me about what being an older brother is like? Does it make you feel closer to her to have that while you have to be away from her?"

I am hoping to start to do a research project about it, actually. I have been slowly getting started doing free cover-ups and free reworking of tattoos for people who are coming out of the prison system. I am trying to coordinate that service as a larger effort with other tattoo artists. In a few cities there are programs that do free laser removal for people being released and former gang members. Los Angeles has Homeboy Industries.[7] In Chicago there is a similar one called Homies Unidos.[8] In New York there aren't many resources of that type.

Some tattoos can be a real barrier to employment, and it can be empowering to know that a choice that you made that seemed permanent at the time doesn't have to be. I am hoping to integrate into the tattoo classes a project where students design a cover-up or a rework of a tattoo that they have and find someone that can do it for them *pro bono* once they get out.

I am starting to collect some narratives and personal histories of the folks who want cover-ups. From a radical perspective, I see tattooing as being significant because it is a way to assert ultimate authority over your body. It is a way to assert your sense of self and your identity, and in a place like prison or jail where you are being stripped of that in many different ways, and so many aspects of your bodily functions and movements are being controlled by the state, I think that is something that needs to be talked about. I don't necessarily include that in the curriculum, but it does come up, and I think it is important to conceive of a tattoo as something that is yours for life. It's something that can't be taken away from you; the police can't seize it from you, the officers can't confiscate it from you, and even though you are in a uniform, this tells me something about you from before you were in this place.

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[7] Website: www.homeboyindustries.org/what-we-do/tattoo-removal.

[8] Website: https://homiesunidos.org/programs/tattoo-removal.

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