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Keeping Time: Jesús' Humanity in Ronald L. Ruiz's *Happy Birthday Jesús*

As is aptly noted by Adam Gopnik, "A prison is a trap for catching time." More than that, as is shown in Ronald L. Ruiz's *Happy Birthday Jesús*, repressive entities like prisons operate in ways that not only catch time, but also stretch it into an endless void. In Ruiz's novel, both school and prison are two forces that use time to oppress Jesús. Time becomes for him both never-ending and invasive. When confronted with endless time, Jesús compensates by counting it, effectively breaking endless time into smaller, manageable piece in an act of self-preservation. Ruiz contrasts how Jesús treats time in these cases with how he treats time in the final scenes of the novel, ultimately demonstrating through Jesús' use of hyperbolic time, his humanity.

Throughout the novel, Jesús is oppressed, and the entities oppressing him are made all the more horrible because of the way they distort time. When Jesús realizes the length of time he will need to spend at school, he reflects "If one day had brought that much pain, how much would four years of those days bring?" He notes that time has invaded his body through his food, "I tried to eat, but the food tasted of time, time that would never end" and through his eyes, "those four years slipped between my eyelids and eyes, like two gray sheets" (Ruiz 190). In this way, Ruiz presents school-time as not only an oppressive force, but also as a

violating one that can enter his body.

Ruiz presents prison-time as similarly oppressive, though in a less invasive manner. Prison-time oppresses with its endlessness, often depicted as a void. In prison, Jesús is presented with the possibility of losing all sense of time, “I know I was in for another one of those times that just slipped by. They were blanks; voids, because the next day, or the day after, they would be gone” (Ruiz 69). When in isolation, this possibility is realized, for without sunlight, Jesús cannot enumerate the days, “Was that yesterday or today that he had come? I lost everything in the dark” (Ruiz 263). Clearly, through the description of school-time and prison-time, Ruiz points out how these entities construct time in an endless and penetrative manner, which ultimately serves as an oppressive force for Jesús.

In response to this oppressive time, Jesús adapts, choosing to quantify time rather than face it in its vast form. Jesús keeps time, in a very literal way. When he isolates himself on the roof of the King Theater, he counts the hours and days that will point to his freedom from school. He observes, “There were two-hundred and forty minutes in the morning and two-hundred and ten in the afternoon” (Ruiz 199). Jesús also makes use of a temporal marker, in the form of a whistle, “At noon a whistle blew...only two-hundred ten minutes left. That was today. The thought of tomorrow or the day after tomorrow twisted my gut” (Ruiz 199). In this way, Jesús breaks time into smaller pieces he must survive, and attempts to make manageable what appears to be endless.

Jesús similarly keeps time when he is in prison. Prior to his isolation, he

counts the time before his trial, “There were fifty-eight days until my trial” and he continues, “then there were only 54 days until my trial. Then 36, 31, 28...” (Ruiz 55, 57). Even in isolation, when he can no longer use days to keep time, Jesús finds a way to quantify it. Using another temporal marker, this time his food trays, Jesús measures time, “It didn’t matter that I hadn’t bled for two trays now” (Ruiz 268). The casual use of trays as temporal markers with the words “for two trays now,” places emphasis on the fact that Jesús has fully adopted this new way of viewing time. His time now is no longer based on the rising and setting of the sun, but rather on the only regular activity in his isolation—the bringing of trays.

The simple act of counting for Jesús is a form of self-preservation. Although this self-preservation can be seen as linked to his humanity, it is by no means intrinsically so. Jesús’ counting of the trays is similar to the fact that he eats off of them—as pointed out by a guard, “You keep eating. If you didn’t want out, if you really wanted to end it, you’d stop eating” (Ruiz 283). Jesús here demonstrates his desire to survive through his imprisonment, but not much else. At the end of the novel, however, Ruiz alters the same counting method, creating a contrast with these instances of keeping school-time and prison-time. It is through this contrast that Jesús’ humanity becomes immediately apparent.

Ruiz establishes the act of counting in both Jesús’ two acts of violence, in particular, the counting of three. This counting is similar to that done in school, and in prison. The second act of violence is really just a continuation of the attempted first, and in both cases, Jesús waits for three days, committing his acts of violence in a perverse imitation of the resurrection of Christ. When he attacks

Father Galván, he “waited for three days and three nights” (Ruiz 97). His first act ultimately fails, however, not only because Father Galván fails to appear on the third day, which Jesús thinks “was funny” but also because Father Galván does not die—God cannot be killed if that which stands in for him remains alive (Ruiz 97).

When Jesús returns to the church the second time, he similarly counts the three days he must wait before killing the priest, “All right Cocksucker. On the third day You rose again from the dead. But on this third day You and everything here is gonna die” (Ruiz 308). In contrast to the first incident, however, Jesús’s enumeration does not cease at the exact count of the three days, but rather explodes from him in hyperbole, “Because three hours wasn’t enough. You only hung on that cross for three measly hours, and I’ve seen three million hours of pain and hurt and suffering. I’ve seen three million hours this time” (Ruiz 308). When Jesús thinks of Jesus dying for sin on the cross, he cannot believe that all his own oppression and pain could fit into three hours, and therefore he explodes, “Three hours wasn’t shit! Three hours is bullshit! There’s too much out here for three hours!” (Ruiz 313). With the hyperbole “3 million hours!” Jesús finally expresses a definite human quality—that of empathy. “There’s too much out here” reflects the fact that Jesús is looking beyond himself, and those “3 million hours” are an aggregate of all the pain and suffering he has seen people, including himself, endure at the expense of oppressive institutions. The obvious parallel between his name and the name of Christ serves to further this comparison, because just as Christ died on the cross for the sins of humanity, so

is Jesús rebelling not only for himself, but for all the pain “out here” in the world.

The fact that this explosive counting of time is in such stark contrast to Jesús’ somewhat calm and methodical keeping of both school-time and prison-time, points to a development in his character. Exact time is lost in this hyperbolic shout that culminates in the final murder of a priest. No longer can his pain and isolation be quantified in snippets of time, it explodes into “3 million hours!” –far more hours than any person ever has in a lifetime. His self-preservation strategies do not work with all the pain “out here” and his rebellion against this oppression, his empathetic claim of “too much out here for three hours” is ultimately what makes him human.

Time plays an integral role in *Happy Birthday Jesús* by Ronald L. Ruiz. Oppressive institutions are seen as such in part because of their ability to distort time into an endless void, a void that can sometimes be even physically invasive. Jesús copes with this time by counting it, thereby enacting an act of self-preservation throughout the novel. Ultimately, Ruiz contrasts this keeping of time with Jesús’ keeping of time at the end of the novel, demonstrating Jesús’ humanity in his violent struggle against his oppression, and his empathy for the pain of others. In this contrast Jesús can be recognized as human because his counting is no longer simple self-preservation—it is rebellion vocalized in hyperbolic time, “3 million hours!”

Works Cited

Gopnik, Adam. "The Caging of America." *The New Yorker* (2012): Web.

Ruiz, Ronald L. *Happy Birthday Jesús*. Houston: Arte Público Press, 1994.