

Monsters of Our Own Making

*"I can't see 'em coming down my eye
so I had to make this poem cry
this pen bleed
this paper scream with emotions with hopes it makes
us free..."*

—Jimmy McMillan, poet incarcerated at a California state prison

The lifer stood up to read his writing after 15 weeks of sitting in a creative writing class I facilitated at a classroom in a maximum-security yard of Lancaster State Prison (California State Prison-Los Angeles County). It was our last day of that session. I had just passed out completion certificates and was about to share juice and cake the prison kitchen staff brought us. The 40-something year old man hadn't said much during the previous weeks. He didn't seem to be writing either. I had noticed this but it didn't bother me. The class was lively with a flow of ideas and expressions; most of the guys were serving life sentences or Life Without the Possibility of Parole (LWOP).

I always feel people listen in their own way. Seeds were being planted, and if someone kept coming to class, I kept teaching.

But now this man stood up and read, opened up his heart, about how, ever since he could remember, he had been abused; how drugs took his parents away from him; how he bounced around in the foster care system, juvenile detention centers, and prison; and how being callous, a predator, gave him power, identity, a way of getting back. But he also related how lost he had become, detached, not fully human. His words were not a litany of excuses or complaints. They were recognition of terrible choices in a world of limited choices, the fears and paralysis that impelled him to diminish his true callings.

This OG, African American, didn't care how he would be perceived at that moment. Tears began to fall from his eyes, even as his voice remained strong. We were all riveted. Tears inside if not on the outside. The men's silence was the best respect he could have received. When he was done, the quiet lingered for a beat then the applause rushed in. The men were visibly moved as this man stood poised, unwavering, in the whirl of dark and convoluted sentiments. This and similar moments have made my work in prisons some of the most healing and sacred anywhere.

I've been coming into prisons to lead workshops, healing circles, talks, and poetry readings for 40 years. I've done this all over California (San Quentin, Soledad, New Folsom, Chino, and Lancaster) as well as county and city jails, and juvenile lockups, up and down the state. I also entered prisons, jails, and juvenile facilities in Illinois, Michigan, Pennsylvania, Connecticut, Indiana, Ohio, Nebraska, North Carolina, Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, Nevada, Washington, Virginia, and Delaware. I've worked with organizations like Barrios Unidos, the William James Foundation, Insight-Out, Inside Out Writers, and as an employee of the Alliance for California Traditional Arts.

This work has gone global. Over the years, I've visited ten adult prisons and a juvenile facility in El Salvador; two prisons in Guatemala; two prisons in Nicaragua; a prison and juvenile hall in the state of Chihuahua, Mexico; five prisons in Argentina; with juvenile offenders in Italy; a young adult lockup in southern England.

Most of these visits were one-time talks or readings, although I did spend three days in that prison in England; several continuous weeks in Chino Prison; eight months in Lancaster Prison in southern California in 2007; and beginning in the fall of 2016, several 13-to-17 week classes at the latter.

I see prisons as the shadows of the “normal” world, mirroring the fragile economic, political, and cultural foundations we’ve stood on for over 240 years as a country, based on slavery, inequality, and the interplay between the powerful and powerless. They are also places of light and intelligence within the dark. Any idealizations that prisons or the police state are the answers to crime, dysfunction, or “evil” is naïve, and strangely cynical. Naiveté and cynicism may seem a dichotomy, but they are also interrelated.

Two dangers in this country are to be naïve about what made us, what we face, and where we’re going, and the other danger is to be cynical—tired, negative, sabotaging hope with an attitude of “why bother.” Prisons *persist* because of the interweaving of the naïve and cynical. But they *exist* because the people this society cannot feed, house, teach, or incorporate must be put somewhere. If these people won’t go to war, stay employed, or otherwise contribute to the “system,” then dysfunction and crime are inevitable, and prisons are the perfect industry to feed off the “monsters” among us.

They are, however, monsters of our own making.

People aren’t born to steal, lie, hurt, or kill. Yet with enough external and internal pressures, you can mold such a person. Anyone is capable. Just deprive people of basic needs, especially of healthy nurturing—rampant among the poor—and of viable ways to go. Put such persons into an “oven,” as a homie used to say, and you’re more likely to “bake” a gang member, a thief, a murderer. The point is how our society, our culture, its frazzled webbing, makes crime and criminals not just possible but predictable.

I’m not against personal accountability—I’ve had to address this with countless men, women, and youth over the years, beginning with myself and with my oldest son Ramiro, who is now gang-free, drug-free, and crime-free. Personal

accountability works best if we also comprehend the familial, economic, and political forces at play.

Of course, there are people who are more capable of resisting the pressures of duress, depravity, and disinterest with enough soul depth, intelligence, and creativity. It helps if they have strong moral and character development along the way. I witness this in prisons all the time. But, again, the chances of turning out a certain way under certain circumstances will most likely lead to certain results.

Most of our society treats people as if they are static beings: *Once in trouble, always in trouble*. It's as if once inclined to pathological levels of lying, manipulating, and cheating, even violence, there is no breaking the mold. Prison's main premise is punishment. We punish those who have broken the rules, but also to serve as deterrent to others who will, as the thinking goes, do whatever they can to avoid such punishment.

Punishment only works up to a certain point, particularly in a child's development. And only if the punishment fits the "crime." It doesn't work for those who've been "punished" just for being—in black or brown skins, migrants from other countries, working class, poor, a woman, or LGBTQ. These are circumstances not of one's choosing. Here's where discrimination and the organized blocking of decent and meaningful work, health, education, and the complete flowering of one's development and unique contributions, can do the most damage.

As my wife Trini says, "the poverty of access."

Trini's words inspired a poem by African-American poet and Northeast San Fernando Valley resident Jeffery Martin:

The Poverty of Access

It cheats a long line of tired, withered hands
coursing through generation after generation
of veins too weary to imagine
a kinder existence

It cheats brilliant minds
it cheats brilliant minds
it cheats brilliant minds
leaving them suffocating on a frustration
they can no longer define

It cheats limber bodies
that have no idea
they were meant to dance

dance in the four directions of life
meshing with the deities of
wind fire earth and water
creating light bright
and transforming

The poverty of access
closes books before sentences are complete
before action can coincide with thought
before the mind body and spirit
introduce themselves

This poverty is harshest amongst its young
for it starves them intellectually
long before ravaging their stomachs

It says no you can't and means it
it says you are unworthy
and means it
it says here is where you belong
and means it

The poverty of access
steals souls as well as land
murders ambition as well as men and women
who ask too many questions
it fills prisons and dungeons
with corpses breathing yet
breathless

moving yet motionless
eating yet starved

It gives prostitution its place
then sneers
it gives violence its place
then sneers
it gives homelessness its place

then sneers
it gives crime its place
and then claims prophecy

This poverty of access
does not tell stories
it stunts them

with nasty words like
cannot
will not
must not

It is a poverty that guarantees
an outcome as unfair
as it is unwarranted

Under these realities, there's little or no deterrence to crime because prisons (or foster care or mental facilities or... you name the institution created to supposedly address the gaps) become a "rite of passage," part of the "outlaw" life, the outsider reality, which such people get driven into. The cumulative traumas create a vortex of emotional and pathological anguish that suck out all the enjoyment and hope one would otherwise have. Looking at it this way, going to prisons, taking drugs, or being in gangs can be rational decisions.

The same can be said of mass incarceration in the US, whose nets were widened with "three-strikes-and-you're-out," "truth in sentencing," gang and gun

enhancements, trying youth as adults, and more. Of course, people driven to the brink will fall through the cracks—maybe not all of them, but enough of them.

We make more laws and end up with more lawlessness.

Mass incarceration is this country's chief way to address poverty, especially targeted against those in the desperate grip of survival as well as the discontent related to poverty. Without ways to get rid of poverty, prison is society's answer—and as others have pointed out, to maintain a system of slavery.

In California, the most affected are people of color—African Americans, Mexicans/Central Americans, Asians, and Native Americans. But poor whites are not exempt. In California, with a \$12 billion budget, prisons have become the largest subsidized poor peoples' housing. The yearly cost per prisoner in the state is \$64,000. The disproportionate numbers of black and brown people is palpable. More than 70 percent of the state's prison population is African American or Chicano/Mexican/Central American (42 percent brown people; 29 percent black), although together they are little more than 45 percent of the state's total population.

It's time for real freedom—not just to speak out, to write, or to assemble, but ultimately freedom from want, hunger, lack of decent homes, and repression. It's time to stop making “criminals” out of circumstance.

Humans are capable of great transcendence—to go beyond the material, and often man-made, constraints. We can become vessels for the unseen, to overcome actual prisons but also prisons of mind and soul, chaining our capacities. Reconnection, realignment, and rethinking are part of the process, albeit often arduous, long, and full of setbacks. But with this, success is a likely outcome.

Today most people have “forgotten” this. We’ve forgotten the process needed whenever anyone or anything goes awry, overcome by social, familial, and personal failings. When people feel these skewed energies running through them, too often they are impelled from their very bones to great destruction, against themselves or others.

Today activists are establishing restorative and transformative justice practices as alternatives to punishment-based models. In this model, agreements are made between perpetrators and victims to restore whatever was taken, hurt, or damaged. In the process one also gives back from one’s own gifts—that’s restitution (not cleaning streets or paying into “victims” accounts). Both parties are transformed. Whenever a perpetrator is healed, community is healed. And a new basis is laid for more healing. When done comprehensively, rightly resourced, and with enough time and patience, these methods almost always work.

However, today most prisons often end up making sophisticated criminals of these same people, rather than redeeming them—all at taxpayer’s expense.

Of course, there are strong and powerful exceptions. And these men and women prove that change is everywhere; change is the way of spirit and nature. Change is God’s plan—and this has been proven by millions of people.

In the last twenty-six years I’ve entered a number of *penales* in El Salvador: Mariona, San Vicente, Ciudad Barrios, Zacatecoluca, Chalatenango, Cojutepeque, Quezaltepeque, Izalco, and San Francisco Gotera. This is a country that knows about prisons. As of June 2017, El Salvador had an imprisonment rate of 590 per 100,000. Around 38,410 people were incarcerated (not counting youth or young adults), plus 3,000 in holding tanks, of a total population of 6.5 million. The

imprisonment rate in the United States, which has the highest rate of all *developed* countries, is 478 per 100,000.

The facilities I visited were stark and indefensible. Some had no electricity or clean water. Diseases were rampant with little or no medical care. In larger facilities that held mostly men, separate cells had young mothers holding babies, who were also behind bars with them. Housing was extremely overcrowded with cells built for four men now holding 20. One facility had layers of dungeons with decreasing sunlight as one continued deeper below ground. There were separate prisons for Mara Salvatrucha-13 and 18th Street, as well as for prisoners not affiliated with those gangs.

I also visited women-only institutions with cellblocks loaded with beds, clothing, blankets, whatever possessions they could get a hold of, including *chambitas*, makeshift housing on the prison yard. In many institutions the only food prisoners had was what their families could bring.

No human being should be treated this way. But they're *maras* (Central American slang for gangs), and the narrative that drives this cruelty asserts they're nothing more than stone cold killers, torturers, extortionists of the poor, and unredeemable. They *deserve* this treatment—or worse.

These *maras* only exist because of civil wars, driven by money and power, during which the United States, especially in the Reagan years, escalated the conflicts by supporting the ruthless families and governments that ran things, at the expense of the vast majority of mostly indigenous or *campesino* people.

Wars to stop “communism” in the 1950s through the 1980s claimed 100,000 lives in Nicaragua, 75,000 lives in El Salvador, 200,000 lives in Guatemala, and thousands more in the Contra War from 1981 to 1990 in Honduras and Nicaragua. In the 1980s, some three million refugees from these

countries ended up in the United States, the majority coming to Los Angeles, but also Houston, Washington D.C., Long Island, or San Francisco.

Tragically, in Los Angeles, the trauma of civil war and death squads met the trauma of inner city Chicano and African American gangs. Many Salvadoran and other Central American children of these refugees joined Chicano gangs that had existed, in some cases, since the turn of the last century—or from the 1960s, like 18th Street.

Mara Salvatrucha, on the other hand, were created by Salvadoran refugee youth in the early 1980s. First they were known as Mara Stoners—a metal-rock loving, longhaired, “AC-DC” T-shirt wearing party crew. After some ended up in juvenile hall and L.A. County youth probation camps, they returned to their homes as *cholos* and took on the “Salvatrucha” tag. They originally became part of 18th Street, but broke off and waged war against 18th Street and other gangs in the Pico-Union *barrio*, as well as their Koreatown, East Hollywood, Northeast San Fernando, and South L.A. neighborhoods.

Street gang life overall in the US reached its highest levels of violence during this time. In Los Angeles, one estimate was that over 10,000 young people were killed, propelled by the drug trade, but also turf battles, from 1980 to 2000. The majority of those killed or arrested were Chicano and African Americans, but Central Americans were also among them.

After the 1992 L.A. Uprising, with 63 dead and a billion dollars in property damage, US immigration officials targeted Mexican and Central American gang members for deportation while law enforcement agencies moved to lockup more US-born black and Chicano youth, helping create the largest mass incarceration system in the country.

By 1993, the Mara Salvatrucha—which by then also incorporated Guatemalan, Honduran, and Mexican refugee youth—joined the largely

Chicano *Sureño* gang structure, which was when they added the number 13 to their name. What most news reports fail to point out is that almost all L.A.-based Latino gangs have 13 after their name, including my barrio, *Lomas 13*.

Despite the manufactured notoriety, MS-13 is only one of L.A.'s 500 or so Latino gangs. While the federal government claims there are 10,000 MS-13 members in the US (which I highly doubt), this is only 1 percent of the million or so gang members around the country. Remember, there are still active super-gang alliances spread around the country—including the L.A.-based Bloods & Crips (mostly African Americans), *Sureños* and *Norteños* (Southern California or Northern California Mexicans), and Chicago-based Folk & People (including Latin Kings, Gangster Disciples, Vice-Lords, Latin Maniac Disciples, and hundreds more). And there are also white supremacist criminal gangs in the streets and prisons that per capita have probably committed more violence than any other group.

And while Trump claims that MS-13 is amassing at the border, in 2018 they were only .096 percent of the migrants ICE detained there. MS-13 may be *gruesos* (hardcore), they are *not* the worst or largest US street gang.

All this talk about MS-13 fits into a false narrative—that undocumented criminals are causing most of the terror and violence in the United States. With this deceit, thousands of L.A.-based gang youth, along with other so-called criminals, were deported. By 1996 under the Clinton Administration, a new immigration law targeted convicted people without proper immigration documents, even for minor nonviolent crimes. Upwards of a million people have been returned to their countries of origin since then. The greatest number of deportees ended up in Mexico and Central America, although other countries like Cambodia and Armenia also saw an influx of sophisticated US-trained criminals.

In Central America, these deportations changed a culture. MS-13 and 18th Street, heavily tattooed like their Chicano counterparts, dressed in *cholo* attire, talking in the street lingo of L.A.'s *barrios*, but also trained in

urban gang warfare and extortion tactics, brought all this to the Northern Triangle countries of El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, as well as parts of Mexico. In Belize, gang deportees were mostly Bloods and Crips. This created more violence, which in many cases exceeded that of their civil wars.

People in these countries had long understood class wars, battles between those who owned land and those who didn't, the Right and the Left, but not *this*—drive-by or “walk by” shootings, whole families targeted, just because of which gang one belonged to, or didn't. Nobody understood killing because of *letras* (letters) such as MS or *numeros*(numbers) such as 18th Street.

This is the madness of exporting US-based *barrio* warfare.

The US government delivered these gangs to countries with little or no resources, with slums that crawled up hillsides and in concentric circles around capital cities, without work or opportunities, with gaping gulfs between those who have and those who don't. Countries that for decades suffered through massacres, death squads, beheadings, tortures, the disappeared—layer upon layer of grinding, crushing violence.

The gang violence in those countries can be horrendous. Grenade attacks. Cutup bodies. Mothers and fathers and siblings slaughtered. Now some MS-13 and 18th Street members have returned to the US, most with this degree of violence under their belt, and have spread out to cities across the United States. A vicious cycle created and perpetrated by the United States government.

Despite this, the US refuses to take responsibility. Instead, Trump and other Republicans cynically use the mess they set up in the Northern Triangle—as well as the thousands of migrants at the border escaping the violence—to consolidate their power.

Here's a truth that's often missed: These gang youth can be helped, based on gang intervention work throughout the US and across borders, based on my own 45 years of prevention, intervention, and urban peace. I know of transformative and healing work done

with MS-13 as well as Chicano gangs to get them out of *La Vida Loca* (The Crazy Life) and into treatment, jobs, schooling, and families. Like any gang member, MS-13 and 18th Street gang members can be rehabilitated, retrained, and re-incorporated into society on a positive and healthy basis. Organizations like Homies Unidos, Homeboy Industries, and Barrios Unidos have already proven this for some time. This is what we should have done with MS-13 and 18th Street instead of deporting them, wrecking havoc instead of weaving hope.

The mass media, LAPD, and federal authorities instead have focused on MS-13 as if they are an isolate, from another planet, another species of gang. MS-13 became the first street gang designated as a transnational terrorist organization. In September of 2017, Congress approved a law targeting these so-called “immigrant” gangs as the “worst of the worst.” But those in the street or in prison, and gang interventionists working with them, know they are capable of profound and lasting transformations.

I first visited El Salvador with Donna DeCesare, a New York-based award-winning photojournalist. In 1993, we received a Dorothea Lang-Paul Taylor Prize from the Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University to research, do interviews, and photograph *maras* in Los Angeles and El Salvador.

We also spoke at the “Salvadoran Youth Confronting Violence” Conference in 1996, organized by non-governmental agencies from Italy and other European countries, which led to perhaps the first MS and 18th Street peace efforts.

Donna and I helped bring members from both gangs to address their concerns, including youth with *placasos* (gang monikers) of Diablo, Crazy Eyes, Pelon, Villain, Negro, and Whisper. At the conference, gang leaders, mayors of major cities, and members of the new National Police signed a peace accord. In the end, MS and 18th Street members embraced each other, as did priests and

evangelical ministers (who were also in conflict), and National Police officers and community members.

But the political will to sustain the peace was not there. The right-wing ARENA-led Salvadoran government at the time undermined the peace and a few years later instituted “Mano Dura” (Iron Fist) and “Super Mano Dura” policies against the *maras*. The US government provided \$3 billion from 2008 to 2017, mostly for the growing private security industry (with investments from US-based companies) and new policing and prison strategies under the Central America Regional Security Initiative (CARSI).

Despite this, another powerful opportunity surfaced for peace when MS-13 and 18th Street (also know as Barrio 18) in 2012 established a truce in one of the major prisons, which spread out to other prisons and into major areas of the country.

That year I returned to El Salvador with ten urban peace leaders, advocates, and researchers from L.A., San Francisco, New York City, Washington D.C., and London—a team coordinated by Luis Cardona, a Puerto Rican/Guatemalan, former Latin King, and peace warrior in Montgomery County, Maryland. Known as the Transnational Advisory Group in Support of the Peace Process in El Salvador (TAGSPPE), our main charges were to assess, assist, and advise the growing peace movement.

A Salvadoran priest and an activist aided these efforts: Monsignor Fabio Colindres and former guerilla leader Raúl Mijango. The peace echoed the “End Barrio Warfare Coalition” and other peace efforts of Chicanos in the 1970s in California as well as Bloods and Crips truces of the 1990s. Necessarily, it had its own unique Salvadoran qualities based on peace accords in 1992 that officially ended twelve years of civil war.

The results were extraordinary. In some places, there was a 70 percent drop in violence; murders declined from 14 per day to five. It included the end of many extortion rings and highly publicized turning over of firearms. Around twelve Peace and Security Zones (*Zonas de Paz y Seguridad*) were introduced where gang members worked with community to garden, learn trades, and paint murals without being attacked. I introduced the latter concept from the Peace Zones I worked with in Chicago in the 1990s among the predominantly Mexican and Puerto Rican communities of Humboldt Park, Logan Square, Pilsen, and Little Village.

During this trip, the TAGSPPEES team visited six Salvadoran prisons, including one for women and a juvenile detention facility. We met with MS-13 and Barrio 18 peace leaders. We talked to community organizers in various pro-youth organizations and dialogued with government officials. By then the left-wing FMLN had a president and other officials in public office. Unfortunately, political pressure from the United States, among other internal pressures, ended up *again* pulling the plug on peace.

In 2013, the Organization of American States (OAS) invited me to San Salvador to speak at a gang conference. However, TAGSPPEES members were told not to mention the gang peace or the US would remove its share of funds, in the millions, from the Washington D.C.-based organization. We were able to address best practices in gang prevention and intervention, all valuable. But were silenced on what was potentially the most powerful path to peace—gang members giving up arms and crime in return for a real process to alleviate job insecurity, derelict housing, and lack of education.

In addition, El Salvador needed strategic structural economic and political changes. This peace had to improve the whole country, not just for gang members. Just providing resources to gang members wouldn't work in a place

with little or no jobs for most people. A firm economic basis was needed for healthy, stable, and long-range life for everyone. Yet peace between gangs—as with the earlier Bloods & Crips or between Chicano gangs in California—could have been the catalyst for such structural changes.

That was an objective the Salvadoran government, as well as US hemispheric interests, could have achieved. Instead, in El Salvador and in the US, such peace was disrupted by government suppression, which forced gangs to become entrenched and intractable. The government eventually imprisoned peace advocate Raúl Mijango. Gangs faced more prisons and police, but little aid to end poverty, or for drug treatment, jobs retraining, healthy re-entry into communities, and transformative justice.

Even former New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani got into the act. In 2015, his private security firm ended up in El Salvador, and paid millions of dollars, even though Giuliani oversaw the rise of racial profiling, police abuses, and the increased shootings of unarmed people in the African American, Puerto Rican, and Dominican communities of New York. Invited by the Salvadoran National Association of Private Enterprise (ANEP), Giuliani was quoted in news services as saying that MS-13 and Barrio 18 had to be “annihilated.” Not to be confused as a metaphor, while visiting Guatemala, Giuliani reportedly told his hosts, “You are not going to solve [crime with] schools, libraries, nice neighborhoods, and sports teams. You have to emphasize law enforcement.”

Again, by 2017 President Donald Trump and then-US Attorney General Jeff Sessions threw around Giuliani’s same language and advocated similar actions against the *maras*. I argue that Giuliani and others benefited financially from the Central American gang crisis while making things worse. This also serves to deflect attention from US culpability for the high levels of disarray and disruptions in El Salvador—the real source of the violence and crime.

Today killings in the Northern Triangle are the highest in the world: El Salvador has the worst murder rate. Honduras is second. Guatemala third. Only parts of Mexico caught in drug cartel wars, and war zones like Syria, have worse levels of violence. This fueled a new refugee crisis between 2013 and 2015 when some 100,000 unaccompanied minors fled the violence in the Northern Triangle to the United States; this fueled the crisis in 2018 to the present with the appalling treatment of refugees along the border.

I first entered a prison to assist in creative writing workshops in 1980. The facilitator was the late Manuel “Manazar” Gamboa, a Xicanx poet, formerly incarcerated (17 years), ex-heroin addict, former *pachuco* (from the Bishop *barrio* of the old Chavez Ravine neighborhood razed in the 1950s to build Dodger Stadium), and renowned community activist.

At the time, I was a daily newspaper reporter for the *San Bernardino Sun*. But I knew Manazar since the late 1970s when we took part in the Los Angeles Latino Writers Association. In the early 80s, Manazar and I, along with others in the community, founded *Galeria Ocaso*, a Chicano oriented art gallery and performance space in the Echo Park *barrio*. I was its poetry curator.

At Chino Prison’s writing workshops, prisoners came away having created incredible work—poems, essays, and stories. Manazar became my mentor in this area, as I watched how the men opened up, dug deep, shared. They even had a feral cat on the main yard they named “Chino Louie,” supposedly after me.

One dude whose work blew me away was John Dominguez, known as “Bandit,” from Watts. He did 23 years in California prisons, mostly for the sale and use of heroin, and was due to be released. I decided to write a long personal essay on Bandit for the *San Bernardino Sun* with a photographer. We entered the prison with permission and followed Bandit around.

After his release, I went to the sober-living home he was in, and witnessed his struggles to find a job, establish meaningful interactions, and his frustration trying to be a father to a daughter he hardly knew. Bandit ended up sabotaging his time “back in the world” by using heroin again.

The last time I saw Bandit he was in a holding tank at the L.A. County’s Men’s Jail. It was 1981 and Bandit had only been out of prison for six months. He was now awaiting transfer to state prison for parole violations. Bandit explained how his parole officer, a younger man, disrespected him, even humiliated him, saying he was an ex-con with no future. The only job he could get was cleaning around a machine shop. Little pay. Little joy.

With calmness in his voice and a resigned expression on his face, Bandit told me, “Free is not free... All I know is prison, and in prison the familiar is more comforting and stable than the uncertainties of being ‘free.’”

Bandit explained how in prison he had clear routines, housing, three meals a day, even if this were limited. Back “in the world,” it was one painful battle after another, including facing a cold-hearted parole official who appeared to do everything in his power so Bandit would fail. He got tired real quick. Bandit needed help, treatment. But for the poorest people, prison *is* the only treatment they get.

After more than two decades being institutionalized behind bars, Bandit did what he could to return to the one comfort he understood—a prison cell.

In the summer of 2010, I spent two weeks in Manchester and London, England, speaking at universities, high schools, and community centers, primarily in Afro-Caribbean communities. Josephine Metcalf, a researcher, writer, and university professor, hosted me along with Barbara Becnel, who co-authored several books

by former Crips leader Stanley “Tookie” Williams, including *Blue Rage, Black Redemption: A Memoir* (2004, Touchstone Books/Simon & Schuster).

Despite an international outcry, Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger had Tookie executed in 2005 after he spent more than 25 years on death row for four murders, although Tookie had renounced his former life and did more to convince youth to leave gangs than Schwarzenegger would ever do.

As for Josephine, she later wrote the 2012 book *The Culture and Politics of Contemporary Gang Memoirs*, which studied the impact of my book *Always Running, La Vida Loca, Gang Days in L.A.*, among others.

My friend Garth Cartwright, a London-based music writer, also showed me around London. Garth’s book *More Miles Than Money: Journeys Through American Music* (2009, Serpent’s Tail) had a chapter on East L.A. that featured an interview with me along with photos. He arranged a slot on Robert Elmes’ BBC-London radio show and a poetry reading in Club Darbuka, a popular London club.

On top of this, Josephine set up three days of workshops at “Her Majesty’s Juvenile Offenders Institution” in Weymouth/Portland on the southern coast. This prison housed convicts aged 18 to 21. I was impressed with the available programming, including a radio station, horses, gardens, and vocational training. But problems have been reported with inmates locked up for 21 hours a day and rampant violence against staff and prisoners.

Before I showed up, prisoners were informed I was “Mexican,” an ethnicity they had never seen before (Colombians, Peruvians, and other Latinx lived in England, but few Mexicans). Yet they knew a lot about Mexican drug cartels. At the time, Sinaloa Cartel leader Joaquin “Chapo” Guzman had escaped from prison and became the world’s most wanted fugitive. The first question the prisoners asked me was, “Where’s Chapo Guzman?”

We had a great time writing and sharing thoughts on serious topics. The majority of prisoners were Afro-Caribbean but there were also Pakistani migrant youths and poor whites. I do have to say that in England, being the home of the English language, a language I've mastered, I had a hard time understanding the prisoners with their mix of Jamaican Patois and Cockney. I told them so. After three days of working together, I learned enough to follow along.

Lancaster State Prison is located in a desert within Los Angeles County, an hour's drive from my house in the San Fernando Valley. In over 10 years I've worked with a few "stars" of the system. One is Kenneth E. Hartman, doing life without possibility of parole (LWOP) for a murder he committed in 1980 while an alcohol-and-drug-crazed 19 year old. Kenneth later changed his life and helped create the first and only honor yard in the California prison system. His magazine writing and book, *Mother California: A Story of Redemption Behind Bars*, brought him awards and national attention. The governor commuted Kenneth's LWOP sentence and in 2017 he was released after 38 years. Then there is Stanley "Spoon" Jackson, another LWOP, already with over 40 years behind bars, who had written poetry books, had musicals based on his writings, a memoir with my friend and fellow prison writing teacher, Judith Tannenbaum, and a prison production of "Waiting for Godot" to his credit. Or Tuan Doan with his own novel based on a mother and son struggling to survive in war-town Vietnam. And I can't forget Jimmy McMillan or Samuel N. Brown, performance poets supreme, with Hip Hop prowess, revolutionary ideas, and transformative visions coming at you from every conceivable angle.

All gifted, disciplined, and, when I worked with them, as upstanding as any men I've ever known.

In the beginning, most of the men in my classes were African American. Because of prison politics, Chicanos at first were not attending my classes, even though they are the largest ethnic group in state institutions. But when word got out about what I taught—creative writing, but also creating thinking and living, and how I drew from indigenous cosmologies based in Mexico and the US with a poet's heart, Chicanos showed up. Many were already superb artists and wordsmiths. Soon there were waiting lists for those who wanted to take part.

One Chicano from A Yard, a former gang member who had done 28 years, secured parole when letters were written on his behalf, including one from me. He had spent eight months in my class. He was published in the book I co-edited with Lucinda Thomas, *Honor Comes Hard: Writings from the California Prison System's Honor Yard* (2009: Los Angeles, Tia Chucha Press). Out of prison now for several years, this *vato* has helped other formerly incarcerated and gang youth find their way in organizations like the Catalyst Foundation, Homeboy Industries, and Youth Mentoring Connection.

Of course, I've also had whites, Asians, and Native Americans in my classes. They all worked hard and produced exceptional work.

No matter the issues and themes we explored, everyone respected one another regardless of cultural, political, and religious differences. I've had progressives and conservatives. I've had Catholics, Evangelical Christians, Muslims, Native American spiritual practitioners, Buddhists, and atheists. All were welcome, all ideas allowed.

There was one incarcerated man who wrote poetry in couplets and interesting turns of phrase. However, he became adamant about his right-wing ideology after Trump won the presidency. I was impressed at how nobody attacked him. I knew the majority in the class had differences with him, but the protocol in the yard took over. People could say what they pleased, without being

shouted down or berated. This didn't mean the dude went unchallenged—the guys were articulate in expressing their disagreements without animus.

One day, this prisoner read a piece that started out praising Trump early on in his presidency, and how the American people should give him a chance. But then he opened up about his own life: growing up dirt poor, parents on drugs, bad schooling, little opportunities, how he felt blocked in, unwanted, unhelped.

When he was done I casually said, “Listen, if you just drop all that Trump stuff, and get to your story—the challenges of poverty and closed doors, the barriers you confronted—then you got us. Now we can relate. It's the commonality of our experiences, regardless of race, that reaches us, not the beliefs or politics we can't agree on, and therefore can't unite with.”

The others in the class chimed in.

“That's right, *ese*, when you opened up about your family and everything taken away from you,” one homie responded, “we were all there with you.”

The dude thought about this. An epiphany seemed to cross his mind. Sure, our differences are real. But there are still things we share, experiences we can connect with—love, loss, joy. And accompanied by deep thought and knowledge, we can pinpoint a common cause to what ails all of us.

We may disagree on what's behind the rain. But if we don't want to get wet, we're all going to need umbrellas. On that we can agree. This understanding—about what's objective and undeniable—becomes the basis for common interests, common aims, common actions.

I've also realized how many people not behind bars, out in the world, working, raising families, are caught in their own “prisons”—poverty, addiction, rage, diminished sense of being, race and gender power trips. I've realized how men and women behind razor wire and cages can be free with intelligence and imagination. I try to help with those “keys” to freedom regardless of what holds

them. Prisons are compressed and intense microcosms of the world, but they can also be powerful schools on how to live, how to become more human. And we still need actual keys to open up actual prisons, to find cures and changes outside of such industries.

In February of 2010, I was in Chihuahua for a week during a time when it was the most violent state in Mexico. It was bad in 1999 when I first visited the Rarámuri tribe of Chihuahua's Copper Canyon. But things had become outrageous by my return.

In December of 2006, then Mexican President Felipe Calderon, with assistance from the George W. Bush Administration, declared war on the country's drug cartels. Deaths attributed to this war have reached horrific proportions. Ciudad Juarez—in the border region where I was born—at the time had the world's highest murder rate: 330 murders per 100,000 people. In 2010 Ciudad Juarez had 3,100 murders in a city of 1.5 million people. Street massacres that year included 17 slaughtered in one party, 14 in another location, and 13 in still another.

After 14 years of war against the cartels, some 200,000 people in Mexico have been killed—many cut up, burned, beheaded, bombed. Another 30,000 have disappeared. This is more than the deaths in the Afghanistan and Iraq wars combined during the same period. While drugs inundated the US to meet the demands of the world's largest drug market, US-manufactured guns went south: For example, there is only one legal firearms dealer in Mexico, there are 6,7000 licensed gun dealers in the US along the Mexican border. Despite the anti-cartel war, Mexican cartels grew to be the most powerful criminal enterprises in the world, with greater inroads into the United States than ever before.

How do you go to war against something and make it bigger and stronger? In fact, the whole war on drugs, starting with President Nixon in the early 1970s, has cost more than a trillion dollars (around \$50 billion a year); this war has put tens of thousands of people behind bars, and killed thousands more in Latin America and US inner cities, only to see drugs become deadlier and more widespread than ever before.

A failure we keep feeding.

I spoke at the Autonomous University of Chihuahua to students studying native peoples. They explained that cartels use Native peoples as runners and villages have been destroyed for the cultivation of drug crops. I spoke to mothers of some of the hundreds of girls and women killed since 1993—estimates have reached 1,000—in Ciudad Juarez’s highly publicized “femicide.” They told me the kidnappings and murders have continued, although they’ve been pushed off headlines because of the drug war.

I traveled in and around Ciudad Juarez in a bullet proof SUV and stayed in a hotel where I was told not to go out at night. I spoke in the worst slums I’d ever been in (and I’ve been in some doozies): Homes made of weathered wood planks, held up with chicken wire, cardboard and plastic as walls and roofs. Sections of communities were named for the Mexican states people had migrated from—Veracruz, Guerrero, Oaxaca, and others. I visited libraries, schools, community centers, and even performed poetry with local poets at the US Consul’s Home that was inside a gated community guarded by armed men surrounded by a razor wire fence.

I entered Ciudad Juarez’s juvenile hall and spoke to the youth, with TV cameras, radio mics, and print journalists on hand. I recall one young man, who had worked with a cartel before his arrest, respond to a reporter’s question about why he did what he did.

“Because, I will never find a job, and if I do it will barely feed me or my family. That will be my lot till I’m an old man,” he said. “But in the cartel, I can have the fanciest cars, best clothes, eat at the swankiest restaurants, and be with all kinds of women. This will last, maybe, two years. Then I’ll be killed, and most likely lose my arms, legs, and head. But for two years, man, for two years, I would have lived.”

In Ciudad Juarez, I saw dead bodies on the street, surrounded by armed Mexican federal troops (by then they had taken over the police department). In my talks, I related about the urban peace work I did in Chicago, Los Angeles, around the US, and in Central America. People were skeptical at first, but I presented an “Effective Community-based Gang Intervention Model.” I had helped to create this model over a two-year period with around 40 gang intervention experts, truce leaders, and peace advocates.

In 2008, the Los Angeles City Council adopted this model. While the city did little to bring it to life, they did create twelve Gang Reduction and Youth Development (GRYD) zones in areas that had 400 percent higher gang-related crime rates than other parts of the city. Their plan included “Summer Night Lights” that kept parks in 32 locations open late with sports, music, film, and more. Once considered the “gang” capital of America, programs like this lowered the city’s gang violence. Other intervention and peace efforts that were not sanctioned played major roles as well.

The response to this model in Ciudad Juarez was positive. Through a friend in the US Consulate’s office, we got this document translated into Spanish. A community group even started a book lending library called “Mama Juana’s” with donated books, emulating the work of Tia Chucha’s Bookstore.

Early in the trip, I entered a CERESO (*Centro de Readaptación Social* or Center for Social Re-adaptation) prison in Chihuahua City. However, before I was

allowed to go in I had to convince the Warden I was qualified. The US Consulate presented me as someone with years of experience in US prisons. The Warden didn't think this was good enough. Then I mentioned I had worked with the *maras* of Central America. This convinced him I was worthy, although he emphasized that the prisoners I was going to address were survivors of a massacre of 20 inmates in a riot the year before in a Ciudad Juarez prison. He then presented me with a photo book showing some of the terrible violence caused by machetes, gunshots, beatings.

"If you still want to go in after seeing these photos you can," the Warden stated.

Since Calderon's war, there has been a rise in prison riots throughout Mexico. Many prisons were run by cartels or street gangs. Guards guarded the periphery, and never entered inside a prison yard. That same prison in Ciudad Juarez had another riot in 2011 with 17 dead. Later 28 prisoners were killed in a riot in an Acapulco prison. In 2016, close to 50 people died in a prison battle between the notorious Zetas drug cartel and their rivals in the city of Monterrey. Prison breaks also hit extreme levels with 153 convicts having escaped a prison in Nuevo Laredo.

In the 2009 prison riot in Ciudad Juarez, a gang tied to one cartel battled with another gang linked to another cartel. Both gangs began in Texas prisons, and after being deported combined with cartels to bloodier results. This craziness comes from historical trauma, including the infinitely destructive Spanish conquest; extreme poverty; the highly exploitative conditions of multinational corporations; Mexican government corruption and neglect; US government impositions and manipulations; and more recently the mass deportations of US-based gangs and criminals to the country. All violence has

roots. All violence, ultimately, makes sense no matter how senseless it may appear.

In the Chihuahua prison, I walked into a cellblock that held the group who had received the brunt of the attack from the year before. We had about 200 guys in a dark room. At first all was well, as I talked about my books and the work I did turning around gang members and other troubled youth.

Then the Warden showed up. All of a sudden, the prisoners' demeanor shifted. It turned out the Warden had never set foot inside the prison walls. Now the men fixed their gazes on him, they stood up, and in bitter tones complained about the terrible conditions they faced—no work, no training, no basic amenities. A gut feeling overwhelmed me, something I've learned to trust in these situations—the prisoners were going to kidnap the Warden, and probably me as well. If this happened, we'd very likely be killed. The two guards with the Warden were no match for the men. We were fucked.

So I did the only thing I could do. I began reciting a memorized poem of mine in Spanish:

*Pedazo a pedazo
te desgarran,
pelandote capas de tu ser,
mintiendo sobre quién eres,
hablando por tus sueños.
En el escualor de sus ojo
eres un criminal—vistiéndote en una chaqueta de mentiras—
hecha de acero a la medida,
eres su retrato perfecto.
¡Quítatela! Haz tu propio manto.*

*Desafía a los interrogadores.
observa bien la muerte en su mirada.
Dí que no te rendirás.
Dí que no les crearás cuando te nombren de nuevo.
Dí que no aceptarás sus reglas, sus colores, sus morales depravados.
Aquí tienes un camino.
Aquí puedes cantar la victoria.
Aquí no eres una raza conquistada,
la víctima perpetua,
un rostro sombrío en la tormenta.
Manos y mente están esculpiendo un santuario.
Usa estas armas contra ellos.
Usa tus talentos dados
—no son de piedra.*

I walked back and forth across the front of the room as I provided more fervor, more poems. At some point the Warden left. The men turned slowly toward me, to my onslaught of words in cadence. Words to make them think and feel. The cascade of language swam across oceans of neglect, death, and history. I didn't know if this would work. But it was the only "weapon" I had, my only defense, my only battle arms—poetry and more poetry. By the end, the men were listening to me again. Soon they relaxed. Everything calmed down. That's how quickly things can turn in prisons.

When I finished, the prisoners and I walked out into the prison yard. A photographer who had gone into the cellblock with me took photos. The rest of us chatted and laughed, as if we were at a park, taking in the sun, enjoying each

other's company. Poetry and profound ideas still hung in the air, on this special day, a sacred day, a day without violence.

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This essay draws from writings in the New York Times, Los Angeles Times, Chicago Tribune, Christian Science Monitor, The Guardian, San Bernardino Sun, and Huffington Post, as well as Los Angeles Public Library website and weblogs at www.luisjrodriguez.com. The poem, "Poverty of Access" by Jeffery Martin was published in "Coiled Serpent: Poets Arising from the Cultural Quakes & Shifts of Los Angeles," edited by Neelanjana Banerjee, Daniel A. Olivas, and Ruben J. Rodriguez (2016, Tia Chucha Press). Used with permission of the author. "Pedazo a pedazo" first appeared in a Mexican literary magazine in the 1990s and also in the 2019 anthology "Desperate Literature: The Unamuno Author Series Festival, A Bilingual Anthology" (Desperate Literature; Madrid, Spain).