

Introduction

It's not too late.

I'm only fifteen.

I can still change my life

And hope to succeed.

—John P.

No, it is *not* too late for the youth who participated in the SOY workshops at the Gardner Betts Juvenile Justice Center to grab hold of their dreams. But the racism running at the foundation of our society—from zero-tolerance policies that capitalize on the criminalization of Black and Brown youth, to the institutionalized segregation of life opportunity—threatens a premature ending for Black and Brown youths' dreams and futures. The myth of the American Dream evaporates in the ghetto.

Chris C.'s poem depicts the structural inequalities that belie U.S. rhetoric of “equal opportunity.” Richer neighborhoods have:

Clean people

Clean houses

Clean cars

Clean roads

But in our 'hoods the garbage

Is in LOADS.

—Chris C.

The youth recognize that their neighborhoods get bad reputations from people who cannot see past the material conditions of their poverty. So the youths' poems insist on portraying and redeeming the humanity of the real people who live in the 'hood:

Other people that aren't from the 'hood

Think these streets are mean,

But they're really not.

—Juan S.

The youth express pride in being Mexican and in belonging to their barrio and their families. Yet they also refer to the conditions that “mess it all up” for the communities that live there—the multigenerational

consequences of institutionalized neglect and divestment from Black and Brown communities:

- Underfunded, failing schools
- Criminalization, racialized policing, and state violence
- Disruption of the social fabric of Black and Brown communities through displacement (via gentrification) and mass incarceration
- Exposure to toxic sites and environmental hazards
- Substandard housing and access to health care
- Exclusion from the job market

Often *these youth* are blamed for the results of this structural violence—and this blame has contributed to their imprisonment. Their communities are blamed too, as justification for even more oppressive and de-humanizing policies which compound to depress their life chances.

So ingrained and inescapable is this systemic social exclusion for poor Blacks and Chicanos that Cris's poem ponders if it will even follow them after death:

*I wonder if Heaven has a Ghetto
and will they let me in?* —Cris G.

**“the assertion of our existence. We are
somebody, we are a people, I am alive.”**
—raúrsalinas, *raúrsalinas and the Jail Machine*

Despite the hard life of the streets—which each young poet acknowledges in his writing—they also respect the barrio as their home and they acknowledge the ways that it shaped them, making frequent shout-outs to their ‘hood: “Be strong and represent.”

The youth allude to the differences in values between their world and the dominant one imposed on them—implying that they have been berated with not fitting into the dominant norm, yet are fiercely proud of standing up for their own way of being:

*I don't know how to pray 'Right',
But I pray my Own Way.* —Cris G.

Their poetry show us how much we miss in our understanding of our society, *and how we become blinded to our complicity* in the structures of injustice which shape and permeate our daily lives, if we do not take into account the perspectives of these youths and others who have been forced to the margins of society—forced behind bars partly, perhaps, so that we in the “free world” *won’t* know their stories. Denied education so that their analyses will not be articulated to a larger forum that could influence public policy.

It is the mission of the SOY workshops to equip these youth with the tools to articulate their world view, both analytically and expressively, with a double-edged blade of: *social analysis*, from their vantage point; and *poetry*, which pierces below the statistics to reveal the human consequences of our lockdown society. From behind the label slapped on them—“social criminal”—they reveal themselves to be complexly rich, astute, and tender youth. In the course of these workshops, the youth have been discovering and claiming their voices, and with that, their realization that they have a future that *they* can define it. Guest Artist Jorge Renaud told them, “You define yourselves through your language.” Through poetry, these youth can resist the objectification of the system—“The life we’re living is *they* life,” writes Cris—to reclaim the power of their self-possession, self-definition, self-determination, and full humanity:

*When I get out,
I’ma shine* —Willie R.

In claiming their voice (¡SOY!) and their *right to be heard* on their own terms, these youth are taking the risk to break the mold. (One participant said, “I can’t publish this poem because it’s too friendly. You can’t be too friendly in here.”) It takes tremendous courage as youth to challenge their self-doubts and to reveal themselves on the page—their full selves, with flashes of their vulnerability—in the midst of hostile environments that prey on self-doubt and train them to keep up their guard for self-preservation. In this context, standing up to read your poem to improvised bass tones is an empowering act of self-determination.

“What is there to talk about racism now
that we have a Black president?”

...is the question that João Vargas uses to challenge his college classes. The youth in the juvenile justice system are proof that we are not “post-race.” Austin is 55% white, 30% Chicano, 10% Black, and 5% Asian, yet the population of Gardner Betts is 70% Chicano, 20% Black, and 10% white. Similarly, across the nation Latinos and Blacks are disproportionately locked up. Co-Facilitator Rene Valdez has commented that going through the juvenile detention system has become a twisted “rite of passage” for Black and Chicano youth today. Forty years after the Black Power and Chicano liberation movements, this pattern of lockdown seems to be the U.S.’s institutionalized way to control Black and Brown communities and to train their kids to know what will happen to them if they slip out of line—to reinforce the message that they are not self-determining, and to pre-empt any notions of liberation and organized rebellion. The prison philosophy of reformism that prevailed when Raúl Salinas was incarcerated in the 1960s-70s (where libraries and creative writing classes were promoted in prison) is now history. Today’s mantra is “zero tolerance,” to feed the insatiable hunger of the prison construction industry. That is why:

*I shouldn't be here 'cause
I have too much potential.*

—Homer H.

If the U.S. were truly a meritocracy, these youth wouldn’t be incarcerated because they are sharp and intelligent. Instead, mean teachers were a common complaint from *all* participants. In the heyday of high stakes standardized test scores and cookie-cutter education, the school system is not equipped to recognize students’ individual talents and styles of learning, nor meet their needs. What does it say about our country that it deprives poor Black and Brown students of adequate educational opportunities? That instead of nurturing the talents of its youth, it locks them up?

SOY youth are aware of the injustices they have been dealt, as is evident in their poems. And they express a desire to change them for the benefit of their family, friends, and the people who live in their ‘hood:

*I wanna change the Ghetto:
People strugglin' and goin' through pain.* —John P.

Ultimately, it is the goal of SOY to help equip them with the tools to do this—for their lives, and the lives of their communities.

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For SOY, Poetry is not just about expressing oneself. It's also about creating a common page from which to engage in deeper dialogues about the profundity of the human condition and the lessons earned from struggle. Some of the most thoughtful conversations we as SOY workshop facilitators had with the youth were the result of the poems we read and discussed together. The poems allowed us a springboard to talk not only about the apparent aspects of their lives, but also about their larger goals, beliefs, and even spirituality...

Jorge has advised viewers of prisoner art not to romanticize prisoners because of the tenderness they show in their artwork, but rather to see them as they'd see any other human beings: as complex and having contradictions. The poems in this chapbook are also real about the thrill and addictiveness of committing crimes:

*I want to stop rimming
But I can't stop grinning ...* —Willie R.

Because poor Black and Chicano youth are invalidated and stripped of agency and opportunities through structural racism, their petty crimes become their voice. Raúl Salinas notes the Fanonian aspect of youth “rebellion” and “defiance” against the social order that's set against you: “So you fight back in any way you can.”

I think the law of survival forces you to react and that is what we did, reacted rather than respond. It resulted in a lot of jails and the life of imprisonment.
—Raúl Salinas, *Raúl Salinas and the Jail Machine*

In their poetry, the youth express a desire to change certain decisions in their lives—yet they are “real” about the barriers they face when they hit the streets again.

Likewise, I don't want to idealize our workshops. The prison setting,

built on conflict, power imbalances, injustices, and masculinist showdowns, doesn't make for smooth sailing for anyone involved. Each session, we faced many challenges to participation. Because "mean teachers" had berated youth for being "bad students," the youth had lost confidence in their reading and writing abilities and were sometimes reluctant to show their vulnerability in these areas. (One student wasn't literate, but did produce poetry, included here.) Students had emotionally shut down to varying degrees, making poetry a difficult terrain to enter. Also, under the high pressure of constant surveillance, where each little decision has magnified consequences, and where expressions of anger at their imprisonment are punished, the youth understandably displayed wide variations in their mood from day to day. A comment from a staff person could strike a nerve—so that a youth who had been enthusiastic for most of the workshop could shut down for the final ten minutes. Yet, all these challenges were also exactly why SOY was there—to allow a space where the youth could at least express their anger and sense of indignity and injustice through our discussions, poetry, and spoken word. To help them in their process for getting out.

To do this, SOY facilitators had to dedicate a lot of good energy to create a safe, supportive atmosphere in the midst of this fraught environment. However, even this was out of our control at times. Random searches of the youths' cells interrupted a couple workshops. Not only did these disrupt our focus, but it violated our collective efforts to maintain a safe space—where the youth could let down their guard and for at least a couple hours during the week be able to relate to each other as youth, in a real way. Sadly, the searches reinforced to the youth the opposite message, that they can never let down their guard.

Poetry writing is intense and scary, especially when used to take a close, honest look at your life. Jorge advised the youth to turn to poetry to look at their hurts, pains, and emotions instead of escaping from them—to take responsibility for them as a step to recovering their power of self-determination.

You, the reader, will find that honesty and courage in these poems. I thank the youth for trusting us, the facilitators, and for taking the leap to be courageous with their "word-power." I am humbled by you, the SOY youth:

y'all know what struggle is – in each moment. It was an honor to work with each and every one of you, to experience together the power of creativity and art behind the prison walls. I pray for all of us to continue to walk with that same courage each day, to continue to support and inspire each other through our creative force, integrity, and *resistencia*. I hope that our work together will sow seeds that can help prevent another generation of Black and Brown youth from being institutionalized and “disappeared” from their families and communities...

* gratitude *

From the very first workshop, João's improvisational bass-playing disrupted the bleak, barren, and austere environment behind prison walls. His bass notes wrapped our circle in another realm of possibility beyond these four brick walls designed to sedate, dull, and hinder creativity and Life. Learning to listen to the rhythms of Black improvisational music opened up varied possibilities to the students for how poetry could become musical, healing, and non-conformist. We experienced how poetry could become *their* unique and autonomous instrument in the midst of their immediate discordia.

Co-facilitator Rene Valdez brings a singular heartfelt force and sincerity into each and every workshop. His vision and belief in the power of the word allowed us to take risks to introduce the SOY youth to ideas & formats way beyond their immediate environs. Raúl's teachings live on through Rene. With Heart and humility, he brings a sacredness and political and spiritual clarity and grounding into every space and circle that he opens. He made this SOY project possible (our first ever at Gardner Betts!). It is his perseverance and spirit that transforms the day-to-day toil of a mom-and-pop business into the sacred space that is Resistencia Bookstore/Red Salmon Arts.

Many people accompanied our “circle” physically and in spirit... Here I would like to recognize our two Guest Artists: Jorge Renaud's poetry is as real as it gets, down to the marrow—haunting, peeling open the wounds. It makes you feel the raw struggle of life and savor the joys. Jorge immediately connected with the youth as a role model on transcending the system on many levels. Jon Mahone of Riders Against the Storm fed the circle with gorgeous introspective rhymes and meditations on language and idioms. I

also would like to honor East Austin warrior Marcos de Leon, who with his own hands made a special gift for the youth to carry with them. Many thanks to Lilia Rosas for contributing her chapbook editing skillz learned at the side of Raúl Salinas. And finally, we thank the staff of Gardner Betts Juvenile Justice Center, particularly, Casework Managers Ena Brent and Kevin Humphrey, and Group Leader Todd Oyler for opening the doors for us to work with the youth.

I AM NOT AFRAID OF CHANGE.

—Ben C., on the day of his release

In closing, I quote from Raúl Salinas' introduction to a SOY program in El Valle:

Just as flowers grow by receiving proper care, attention, and love, so did these young authors blossom tremendously. We witnessed that miraculous human transformation which poetry never fails to produce. Todos crecimos; and in order to help create a world more humane, we must continue...Creciendo!

It is in this way that, as Raúl would chant with the youth,

Poetry is empowering.

Poetry is liberating.

Poetry is healing.

~ czarina aggabao thelen

NOTE:

Just as we were learning to improvise and play off the voices and silences of each other in our poetry jams, the order of the poems in this book too is an interweaving of words and voices.