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**LIBERATORY LITERATURE AND AMOR ART FROM
INCARCERATED HEARTS: A COLLECTION OF CONSCIOUSNESS
FROM *THE BEAT WITHIN* MAGAZINE**

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction

of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

LITERATURE

by

Margarita Bac Sierra

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Abstract

Liberatory Literature and Amor Art from Incarcerated Hearts: A Collection of
Consciousness from *The Beat Within* Magazine

Margarita Bac Sierra

Through this project, I present a new archive of literature and art from incarcerated youth from *The Beat Within* magazine, which is a longstanding twenty eight year old multi-county, interstate, “inside-the-walls” publication. I use a Freireian humanistic methodological approach to understand issues of incarceration and education. Paulo Freire, philosopher and author of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, hones in on the concept of listening to the oppressed as a way for us to learn, which is something I find truly valuable in this project. We have been taught by education and the media that the incarcerated are deviants, and they must be punished. Because of this, I will be using a “boots-on-the-ground” methodological framework that focuses on listening to the real experiences of incarcerated youth—those who have been silenced by the carceral state. I explore methods of juvenile justice literary and art empowerment. Through vulnerable liberatory writing and amor art, the real human heart and consciousness is found.

Dedication

This Master's thesis is dedicated to all fellow humans with hearts— my family, community, loved ones, the past, present, and future generations, and those who have been silenced, ignored, and killed by injustice.

This project explores writing and art from incarcerated individuals in the San Francisco Bay Area, where many Black and Brown people have been both mass incarcerated and killed by the police, yet have transformed tragedy and oppression into consciousness and healing. This author will share and uplift the voices of those who have been silenced, condemned, and punished by the carceral state. *The Beat Within* is an inside-the-walls literary publication founded in 1996. Their art and writing for independence and for community liberation of the soul inspires not only this author but also many people of color, especially youth. It is, in fact, the incarcerated youth, those most oppressed, who can best lead the way for liberation. Most often their voice is discounted because it does not adhere to elevated academic standards. Nevertheless, their voice is powerful and honest. Because the future belongs to the youth, and because there is simply not enough scholarly focus on the most oppressed youths' contributions, this author's original scholarship showcases the pluriversality of their literary talent and creative art.

There is existing scholarship on prison writing, such as Doran Larson's book, *Witnessing in the Era of the Mass Incarceration: Discovering the Ethical Prison*, which highlights the way prison writing is viewed from a political lens which categorizes individuals as either good or bad criminals based on their resistance to their incarcerated conditions:

Prisons credit and encourage (often by coercion) only written and oral communication directed to the disciplinary regime: confessing guilt or demonstrating repentance or debriefing against other incarcerated

people—that is, acts that rebuke personal history and deny the power to represent a community. (Larson 1)

My methodology follows a grassroots approach to analyzing prison writing in that I will not be focusing on the political representation or identities of the incarcerated but will be listening to their desire to heal themselves holistically. My methodology uplifts the true experiences and feelings of incarcerated writers themselves. There are three branches that shape my methodology all of which intersect in critiquing our current carceral system. Our current educational system reflects carceral state logic and oppression which oppresses people of color through hierarchical and racial forms of power. Histories of racial and colonial oppression perpetuate a binary type thinking that feeds into carceral state oppression. Heteropatriarchy and gender binaries intersect with racism, colonialism, and the carceral logic of the education system.

In order to understand the experience of incarceration, we must discuss our current educational curriculum that reflects carceral state logic and oppression. Over fifty years ago, in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Brazilian educator Paulo Friere illuminates how education promotes capitalist clones through the banking concept, the method of teaching that does not view students as subjects but as objects that the teachers bestow knowledge upon. In the confined classroom, there is no dialectical between teacher and student, rather the teacher fills the empty receptacle that is the student. This one-way power dynamic limits individuals' room to question knowledge because they are taught that their subjecthood does not matter; they are, for example, forbidden to use "I" in their own writing. "Good" students accept their

oppression, while “bad” students are alienated from education. For many, especially youth of color, this type of educational model is still the standard. For example, “No Child Left Behind” policies of the 21st century failed our students and simply led to more student alienation. Standardized testing, a main component of “No Child” is about idolizing normalcy and not respecting individuality. The “No Child Left Behind” policy resulted in teachers “teaching to test” rather than prioritizing individual’s understanding of subject curriculum. (Morgan)

This teacher versus student dynamic represents the power structure of the present carceral state, where humans are cast as either good obedient clones or as bad apathetic or rebellious criminals. Their subjective voices and rights are stripped from them once they are convicted. They have been alienated from education and are thus now alienated from society, yet as Freire points out, their voice still lives within them, even though they have been silenced. In fact, the theme of silence is one of the most manifest proofs of their alienation. Without a voice, many people of color begin to believe they deserve their condemned fate.

In *The New Jim Crow*, Michelle Alexander highlights “the myth of colorblindness.” This myth projected through media, education, and propaganda spreads blame, shame, and contempt upon individuals of color. The argument made is that being blind about color/race/ethnicity will allow us to be more just. The statistics, however, do not support justice, as in San Francisco, regarded by many as the most progressive place in the world, race still matters. Over 56 percent of those in jail are African American, even though they make up less than five percent of the city’s

population (Prison Policy Initiative). Alexander offers us a lens to view incarceration as a means to reflect upon ourselves, and society at large, as a pathway for empathy for those who are incarcerated, whose human subjecthood has been forgotten and denied:

“As a society, our decision to heap shame and contempt upon those who struggle and fail in a system designed to keep them locked up and locked out says far more about ourselves than it does about them (176).”

Carceral state logic perpetuates ignorance by conditioning collective society to blame individuals for criminality while ignoring the systems that force them into these roles, such as the “School to Prison” Pipeline that holds zero-tolerance policies and promotes policing in schools:

Policies that encourage police presence at schools, harsh tactics including physical restraint, and automatic punishments that result in suspensions and out-of-class time are huge contributors to the pipeline, but the problem is more complex than that. The school-to-prison pipeline starts (or is best avoided) in the classroom. When combined with zero-tolerance policies, a teacher’s decision to refer students for punishment can mean they are pushed out of the classroom—and much more likely to be introduced into the criminal justice system (Elias).

Our youth’s humanity is not respected. Our youth are punished if they go against the rules of school. Alexander illuminates how societal institutions and the carceral state function according to “the new caste system” where racism is

supposedly obsolete because we have reached a new era of democracy. The “myth of colorblindness” embeds itself under the mask of democratic libertarianism and does not identify, listen to, or sympathize with people of color on a level that recognizes past, present, and future societal injustices.

As a Latina scholar of color, who has personally witnessed the negative effects of police brutality and of incarceration on inner spirit and identity, I feel it is my duty to uplift the voices, stories, consciousness, and art of incarcerated youth who have used their imaginative and creative writing and art to offer healing for themselves and others. Their brave text refuses the limitations of isolation and fear.

Founded in 1996, at the height of mass incarceration in the United States, *The Beat Within*, a literary magazine for incarcerated youth, embodies Paulo Friere’s humanistic approach to writing and authentic education. Following the model of “praxis”, a set of knowledge combining listening, reflection, and action leading to transformation, this publication prioritizes listening to the harm done to individuals instead of categorizing them as deviant simply because of their convicted status. I would like to reflect on the spiritual consciousness that many incarcerated writers experience from the state of isolation. On a holistic health level that revolves around a model of care, *The Beat Within* questions and confronts mainstream education and media propaganda that negatively categorizes individuals without addressing the negative societal harms experienced by those individuals. Their mission statement is as follows:

The Beat Within's mission is to provide incarcerated youth with consistent opportunity to share their ideas and life experiences in a safe space that encourages literacy, self-expression, some critical thinking skills, and healthy, supportive relationships with adults and their community. Outside of the juvenile justice system, The Beat Within partners with community organizations and individuals to bring resources to youth both inside and outside of detention. We are committed to being an effective bridge between youth who are locked up and the community that aims to support their progress towards a healthy, non-violent, and productive life ("The Beat Within").

Through empathetic listening and publication of profound incarcerated ideas, *The Beat Within* passes on the light of introspection and collective healing. Note that in their mission statement, *The Beat Within*, rejects critical thinking as the most important reason for why these youth should write. Idealizing critical thinking in a purely-objective manner is a form of violence because it alienates individuals from their own voice. In traditional classrooms, youth are taught to use their words to win objective arguments and to bully others for objective power purposes. In *The Beat Within*, youth are allowed to express themselves without caring only about objective academic-type of critical thinking. *The Beat Within* values "self-expression", the subjective voice, more than objectivity.

Through research of the 28 year old literary magazine *The Beat Within*, I will reflect upon how incarcerated young females and males use their writing to create a

liberatory identity that helps them unmask themselves and grow, even while showcasing their vulnerability. The literature, poetry, and art from *The Beat Within* reflect how juvenile youth reject vain outer-world statuses of power and at the same time tap into a vulnerable intuition that recognizes facades of power.

One barrier to liberation is the facade of gender. Here in the United States, there are two systems in the carceral state, which are divided into male and female. The male and female gender dichotomy is a Western European concept. This Western idea of gender is historically tied to law and inheritance, distinguishing which person gets to inherit property. In the past, males were allowed to inherit property, while females could not. This was one of the main rationales that separated males from females in legal institutions. The carceral state inherited the gender dichotomy. In the carceral system, there are only two genders allowed to be chosen from, which results in individuals becoming tracked as either male or female regardless of how a person self-identifies their gender. While understanding this dual-gender carceral system, we can also understand how in other cultures gender was not so inflexible. Native American, Indian, and Samoan cultures, for example, had histories of cultural societies that thrived with the fluidity of non-binary, intersex, and transgender identities:

Before European colonization, Native Americans embraced gender fluidity. There were no gender binaries. There were men and women, and then there were feminine men and manly women, and transgendered individuals. In native North American societies, these individuals were considered to be

‘normal’. In fact, those who adopted fluid gender roles were called Two Spirit female and Two Spirit male; and were considered supremely gifted, having the knowledge and ability to understand two opposing sides (“Indigenous Tribes”).

Confining the concept of gender is confining liberation.

Another barrier to liberation is the corporate system. Understanding how prison is a place of profit, control, and surveillance can help us understand the root reality of greed and corruption that is embedded in the carceral state. For example, it is truly shocking to understand that California pays over \$132,000 per year for every incarcerated human being (Hwang and Duara). It seems that we are willing to pay this price because we have been conditioned to believe in the overly-simplistic idea of good and bad, binaries that delude us and terrify us. Black Panther civil rights activist and U.C. Santa Cruz former professor, Angela Davis, analyzes how carceral logic infiltrates our current consciousness through the reinforcement of Eurocentric binaries of knowledge, gender, and race. In *Abolition Feminism Now*, Davis argues that in order to break free from an oppressive and liminal way of viewing the world, self, and others, which dichotomously categorizes people, we must abolish American notions of gender, race, and carcerality all together. In *The Feminist and Sex Offender*, scholars Judith Levine and Erica Meiners offer us a lens beyond the binaries; they encourage an approach that prioritizes care through listening to the harm experienced by the individual. Levine and Meiners advocate for the implementation of a care model instead of a punishment model. They promote using

restorative and transformative justice frameworks that support individuals instead of incarcerating them. Because of the criminal labeling of individuals, there is this reproduction of a stagnant-objective view of crime that detaches humans from their human worth. If they were convicted of a crime, they are automatically considered evil. It is easy for the general public to ingest these overly-simplistic binaries.

Feminist decolonial scholars can offer us a guiding light to view these incarcerated works from a lens of empathy that connects to feeling without personal judgment of the writer. Joy Harjo's idea of interdimensionality can help guide us to feel with the writer in aspects of mental, spiritual, and physical consciousness in the present moment beyond dimensions we can see. Bell Hook's idea of spirituality can help guide us in being open to new perspectives, in being open to aligning thought with action, a peace with interbeing with interconnectedness.

The following section of this thesis respects the humanity of the incarcerated. The advent and height of mass incarceration in the United States occurred during the 1980's and 1990's. Instead of completely losing their sense of identity, incarcerated youth created their own identity, one that romanticized yet accepted their reality as imprisoned individuals. In order to appreciate *The Beat Within* publication, we must review some other significant Bay Area publications, such as *Teen Angel* based out of San Jose and *Mi Vida Loca* based out of San Francisco, that represented authentic incarcerated culture. *Teen Angel* and *Mi Vida Loca* were influential magazines for Chicanx and people of color communities because their true experiences were

represented. Magazines like *Teen Angels* and *Mi Vida Loca* reclaim the humanness of identity and community:

Mi Vida Loca is at the same time a platform of expression where letters, poems, drawings are reproduced, and a space where one expresses himself. Solidarity and pride in belonging to the Latino community. Throughout its pages, we find all the elements that make up this Chicano culture: religion, family but also distinctive signs specific to the street: tattoos, lowriding, urban music including rap ... in a spirit of appeasement and peace [sic] (“*Mi Vida Loca*”)

Another influential Bay Area literary magazine, but one that was actually produced within the walls, is *The Beat Within*, which features artwork and writing from incarcerated youth. Instead of promoting an objective educational type of writing that many times forces youth to abandon their personal identity in favor of a clone-like writing identity, *The Beat Within* champions the personal voice of those most oppressed. As Freire argues, many youth become alienated from education because their personal voice is not respected. *The Beat Within* allows subjective literary reflection, something many of these youth never experienced in school settings. *The Beat Within* illustrates and proves how healing literature can uplift the soul and remind us of histories that have been forgotten.

The Beat Within magazine is a multi-county, interstate, “inside-the-walls” publication. It was founded in 1996 by David Inocencio, former assistant director of the Detention Diversion Advocacy Program, when he partnered with Pacific News

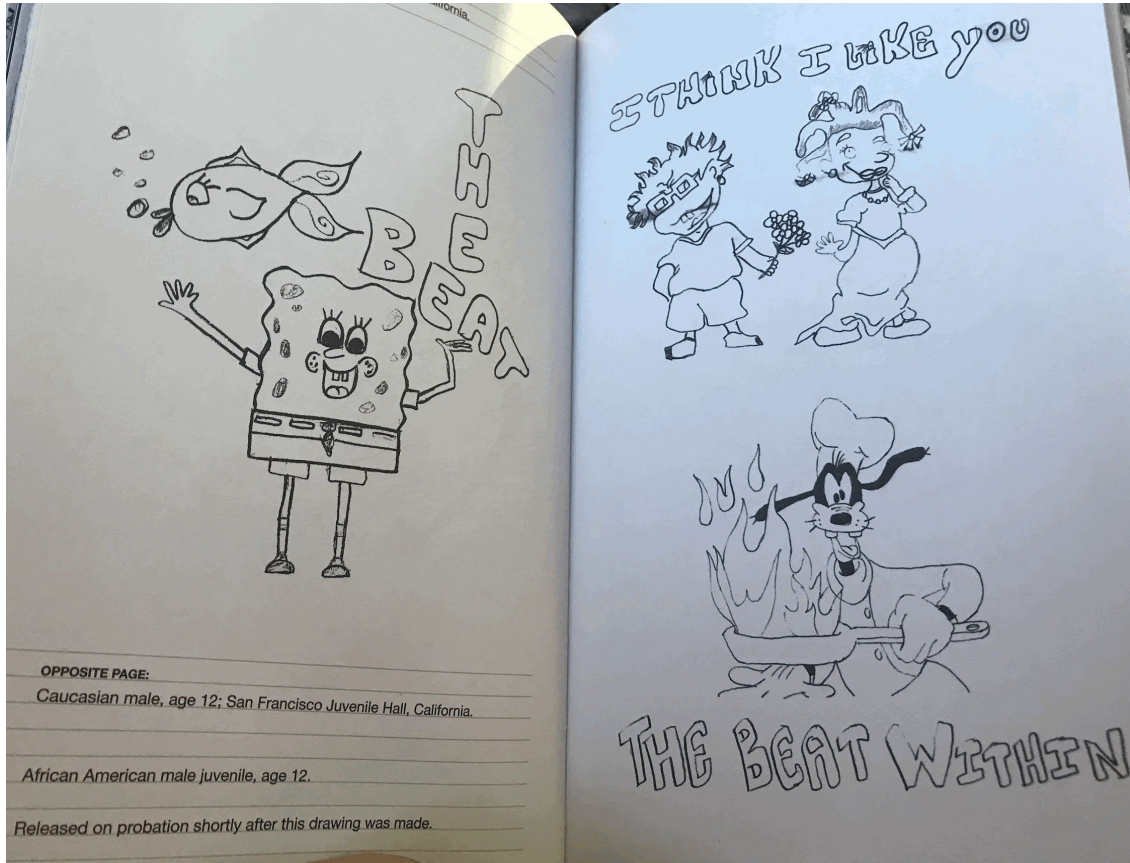
Service, a non-profit media/communications organization, to offer writing workshops to youth detained in San Francisco's Juvenile Hall. The one hour writing workshops are led weekly by volunteers and formerly incarcerated adults in seventeen counties across the United States. These workshops revolve around topics incarcerated youth connect to most. Free form writing and poetry are encouraged. Participants in these workshops are encouraged to submit their writing to the magazine, as well as non-participant incarcerated youth (1 Feb. 2024). *The Beat Within* started out publishing weekly six page magazines. Publications are distributed back weekly to writers in juvenile hall. As *The Beat Within* grew with subscriptions, non-profit organizations contracted with other counties other than San Francisco to hold these writing workshops. In the early 2000's, the magazine transitioned to being a subscription website. Today, *The Beat Within* magazine is sixty pages, and is printed bi-weekly. Every week at least 400 hundred magazines are distributed. Every two weeks, each county receives 500-1000 copies. Printed issues are mailed to at least five to six counties.

In this thesis I provide textual analysis and supplementary scholarship to explain the depth of incarcerated youths' ideas, creativity, and resilience. I begin by exploring the art of pre-teen youth that are incarcerated. Next I transition into an exploration of female text-based articles, then male text-based articles. Afterwards I discuss incarcerated youths' intricate drawing art. Finally, I share an incarcerated youth's creative combination of both art and text, a Cry Later drawing accompanied with a poem that reinforces the theme of my own work: "Time to Change."

(Figure 1) from *Illustrations from Inside The Beat Within*, a book that collected incarcerated youth art and writing through decades of issues of *The Beat Within* magazine.

The Beat Within Magazine

Chapter One: Pre-Teen Youth



I begin with pre-teen artwork because it is simply shocking to realize that in our advanced era, we still criminalize children. This incarceration not only seems contrary to societal morality but also shows the deviance embedded in this system of oppression. Nevertheless, these children create, even in the worst circumstances. These cartoon artworks shown above from incarcerated pre-teen youth embody their inner child positionality and identity. All the mainstream cartoons (Sponge Bob, Rugrats, Goofy) are smiling and happy, even somewhat silly. The art here showcases faith, hope, imagination, creativity, and the innocence of protecting an inner child

despite being forced into punishment and stagnation from the outer world. Cartoons are what these pre-teen youth know. They are not even fully-formed humans, yet are treated as criminals. This art is proof that the youth are still just children.

In *Stranger Danger*, Paul Refro critiques the connection between the United States' carceral state, the image of the child, governmental policies, and media propaganda. In "Welcome to Fear City", Refro describes the 1980's as a time period where capitalist idealism was juxtaposed against the real lives of people of color, like African American children, who were categorized as "African American crack babies". This media and governmental rhetoric of blaming individuals of color for their existence bred shame, guilt, and fear that spread through a guise of lies that negatively categorized people of color for their survival choices. In fact, it was not crack but marijuana, which is now regarded as a recreational substance and legal in most states, that led to most mass incarceration.

The 1980's involved campaigns for youth in schools like the "Just Say No to Drugs" campaign Nancy Regan promoted. The campaign honed in on the implementation of general "American" cultural values and moral purification. The "Just Say No to Drugs" campaign made it clear to "just say no" to drugs, gangs, profanity in music, and pornography. Fear and blame were used upon incarcerated youth, as if it were their sole responsibility to prevent bad things like crime and "cultural rot" from happening. Instead of looking at issues of collective health, poverty, family, and racism, the media and government chose to inject stereotypes of criminality onto juvenile youth, even African American babies trying to survive in

urban spaces. This legacy of overly-simplistic binary badness continues to exist today.

Despite the instilling of criminality onto juvenile youth, the above artworks show the positive playfulness of pre-teen incarcerated children. They choose to draw not gang signs but to depict and reminisce on the child-like humor of Spongebob, the innocent love of Rugrats, and the dynamic inventiveness and silliness of the Goofy character. To these incarcerated pre-teens, their connection to the world has been limited to carceral punishment, so choosing these fictional cartoon characters as inspiring role models helps them remember an unapologetic childish confident spirit that defies outer world notions of criminality imposed upon them. Positive humor and creativity are values these youth have which proves they are not bad criminals trying to do bad, but they are simply children. They defy limitations of race and criminality.

Chapter Two: Female Incarceration

This next section is devoted to textual analysis and supplementary research regarding incarcerated young females' first person published articles in *The Beat Within*. Most mass incarceration affected males of color, but in recent years, we have seen the growth of girls getting locked up. Their experience being incarcerated is different from that of males. Through reading the writing of incarcerated females, one can understand how love for self, family, and community are issues that reflect authentic interpersonal reflection on what these incarcerated females choose to value

in life. Their consciousness in writing highlights how they are grounded individuals who desire human connection and community love. They are not bound by the negative criminal labels placed upon them and yearn for spiritual growth. In the carceral state of isolation, females are not so entrenched in violence or a political state of machismo like in the outer world, and find solace, hope, and faith in remembering family, friends, and self love.

The following entry discusses the idea of unconditional love, and it is from *The Beat Within* category “Piece of the Week”:

“What Money Can’t Buy”

“Family to me is one of the most valuable things in this world. It’s what money can’t buy that makes me the happiest. Something priceless and so cherished as what family is. It’s the love so deep no one else can give you. Blood is not what makes the family. It’s how far you’ll go for them, the loyalty and trust given to one another, your other halves, and many strong, unbreakable bonds.

I have a younger brother and sister and mom and dad. But I consider so many more people in my family. My sister, who I am not blood related with, I went down with, which automatically created a strong bond between us, just because we shared such a memorable personal moment together... just like family.

In my opinion, your most important and happiest moments are spent with your family, and that is just so beautiful. Of course not every moment is rainbows and unicorns, but that’s just what makes the bond even stronger. At the end of

the day there's beauty in every struggle... and the way I see it, if you guys let a situation come in between your bond, you were never family to begin with. Writing this makes me miss my family now that I am away from them. I miss all my loved ones so bad and I haven't even been in here for a whole day yet. Really makes me realize how much I cherish them and how important they are to me.”

Patricia has faith in the love of familial bonds despite being in isolation away from family, friends, and community. The incarcerated experience is new to her as she reveals she has only been incarcerated for one day. The isolation makes her reflect on what moments she cherishes in life— which are the moments of shared intimate imperfect human connection. She does not limit the category of family to those directly blood related, as she mentions a sister, not by blood, “who went down with her,” another person who is incarcerated with her. Here the author exhibits her reflection on valuing the strength, process, and feelings of sublime happiness in sharing human familial moments with others— and that is beautiful in its open empathy and authenticity. She states that the thing she values most in life is family, and “it's what money can't buy” that gives her the most happiness. This vulnerability exhibits a consciousness that emanates a worldview that is not hindered by worries about survival, materialistic ideals, or statuses of the outer world. Towards the end of her writing, she calls the audience to collective liberatory action that offers forgiveness and healing of past occurrences for the peace of one's inner self: “and the

way I see it, if you guys let a situation come in between your bond, you were never family to begin with.”

Patricia becomes a guide and speaks to the audience: she challenges us to think of the strength of familial bonds and calls for us to have reconciliation with family members who we may have had antagonistic relationships with. She offers her personal wisdom by stating that if the audience member is not able to make amends with a family member over a problematic issue, then that person “was not family to begin with”, which I translated as Patricia recognizing intuitively that family is who you choose to have authentic relationships with, people who you love giving love to, who will invite and accept that love, outside the confines of materialism, monetary gains, or societal pressures. Patricia ends on a note of interdimensional healing through remembering to cherish the moments of bonding love with family.

This type of love is unconditional, similar to what Joy Harjo, in *Poet Warrior*, explains to us can be an opportunity to heal spiritually, mentally, and physically, just like this incarcerated writer is healing. Unlike cold objective writing that is for the classroom, subjective writing can lead us to the power of our inner voice. Harjo argues that connecting to our inner voice always leads us in the right direction. In *Poet Warrior*, Harjo’s reverence to listening to her family members’ wisdom can be an example for all humans. Listening can connect us to a rooted purpose in order to better understand oneself and the world. In placing herself in connection to family, she describes being gifted with a consciousness of time she cannot escape as their histories live through her: “A family is essentially a field of stories, each intricately

connected. Death does not sever the connection; rather, the story expands as it continues unwinding inter-dimensionally” (Harjo 18). Despite death removing us physically from our ancestors, we can still understand our ancestors, our families, by opening ourselves to dimensions we cannot see, but that we know are there. We walk a certain way, for example, because of an ancestor we never knew. By understanding that we are inter-dimensionally intertwined, we can escape the corruption and desolation of materialism that is based solely on what we see. Patricia, the incarcerated young woman, is feeling the inter-dimensional connections through her writing.

In *Abolition Feminism Now*, Monica Cobsy, a Chicago based abolition feminist argues how prison is “quite literally a form of gender violence. In both instances, harm results from the arbitrary use of authority, the abuse of power with impunity, the absolute control of bodies, minds, and spirits of survivors, as well as the way that the impact of both gender violence and imprisonment are ignored and minimized. People who suffer from both are blamed for their condition, and re-victimization is common... Cosby further argues that prisons cause the social death of women who are incarcerated by dehumanizing them, stripping them of their rights, and making them invisible behind barbed and brick walls.” Despite this dehumanization process, Patricia has overcome it through having the opportunity to write about it in *The Beat Within*.

In this next entry also featured as “Piece of the Week” in *The Beat Within* we read a critique about negative categorical thinking and the importance of self-love from Angela Zuniga, a young woman incarcerated at Central California Women’s Facility in Chowchilla, CA.

“Haters Weigh Me Down”

“What weighs me down is my haters. Not them personally but their words and beliefs of me. I become so mentally exhausted when I allow their thoughts to become my thoughts. Words are powerful, but going forward I refuse to allow the negativity to consume me.

I am beautiful, strong, and smart. I believe in myself and have plenty of people that believe the best of me. Instead of focusing on the few haters, I’mma let them hate. I allow my words, my beliefs, and the thoughts of my friends and support system to fuel me.”

Angela, an incarcerated young adult female, realizes that focusing on past or conceived states of present hate from other people takes away from an inner strength and healing in the present. The overwhelming reflection and obsession with words from other people leads to a spiral of exhaustion and frustration because the negative thoughts consume one into believing that words of others are the only things that matter and are still relevant. Words can manipulate, yet they also make us feel validated. The education system has taught us that words and intellect are the highest

forms of proof. Angela makes the distinction between the feeling of self-love and the hateful words that weigh her down. She remembers and appreciates her embodied humanness, that is beautiful in its uniqueness. She appreciates a peaceful being without the confines of worrying about what others think.

Critical thinking fails her. Over-analyzing words trap us in stagnant states of meaning and make us believe in a singular type of thinking that categorizes the past as an occurrence that is going to be eternally consistent, in this case—negative. Angela speaks with herself in the present and distinguishes what she values in life, which breaks any mode of artificial consciousness that tries to domesticate her into categorical thinking and scenarios that revolve around negative conditions. Her rebuttal to her haters is, “I’m a let them hate.” This is not an objective winning argument, but it is all she needs inside of herself in order to continue living her life with dignity and self-worth.

In the prison cell, Angela reclaims her beauty, strength, and intellect. She chooses to view existence as a positive one because she has the abilities and physical health of being herself, even though she has been incarcerated and punished. Regardless of this punishment, she finds her voice. Along with a self-affirmation that appreciates her beauty and capabilities, she acknowledges the positive feeling of solidarity and support that is felt from those that reassure her of her best self. This supportive feeling, like a peace, she receives from interacting and connecting with people that make her feel an authentic version of herself that is not limited to outer-statuses and categories of power. She realizes she cannot control the words,

feelings, and thoughts of others: “Instead of focusing on the few haters, ima let the haters hate.” Her statement reflects a worldview that is accepting and optimistic; she will not be bound by negativity she cannot control. She exudes a self-reflective spiritual desire to grow and heal from self-degradation and hate from others. Notions of hate will not define who she is as a unique human.

Finishing our exploration of females’ writing behind the walls, we consider the paramount existential issue of health, written by a young woman locked up in San Mateo, California.

“Becoming Healthy”

“When I look at my life and where I’m heading, I take a step back and pause. I know my life isn’t a hundred percent healthy, but physically I am healthy. Mentally and internally, I am not a hundred percent there.

At times, I feel like I am internally fading away in the abyss. The people I associate with and call a relationship at least took a part of me. Every time I would try to make a healthy relationship, a little piece of my compassion for a person would fade away. My mind isn’t always the healthiest part of my body. With these thoughts I think it can bring down my mood, but I’m slowly starting to regain my consciousness and my compassion.

It was never lost, but the hole internally was patching up piece by piece. I’m getting back to the healthy life, the healthy mind, and the healthy body I once had before. To be the best I’ve ever been, I need to be more

open-minded, more confident, and more spiritual like I was before. I need to stop being so open to trust and let people in without looking at them inside and out. I always feel sorrow for others' problems.

I need to learn how to take a big step on my own instead of thinking I need to have company. Once I finally learn how to achieve those, I will finally be at peace mentally, emotionally, physically, and internally, to achieve a healthy body, mind, healthy habits, and even relationships. I need to be at peace with myself and my life. If I'm not, then I will continue to be unhappy with everyone and everything I create. I will finally head in the right direction." (Zariah)

Two thousand years ago, ancient Egyptian philosopher Plotinus declared that philosophy should be concerned with no less than *To Timiotaton*, that which matters most ("What Matters Most"). This, of course, must be a subjective realization, as what matters most must be personal for each human being. Zariah shows the importance of reflecting about one's body, mind, and spirit. These are aspects of self-consciousness and growth that illuminate a desire to be in control of one's positive actions, thoughts, and strength instead of being consumed by a haunting which hinders an authentic perception of self. Allowing negative thoughts to dominate one's perception of themselves can lead to insecurity, paranoia, over self-consciousness and doubt, which can separate one from feeling physically, internally, and mentally healthy. "I need to learn how to take a big step on my own instead of thinking I need to have company." What matters most must be addressed on one's own.

A connection to mind, body, and spirit through holistic health is the focus point of this young woman's desire to grow from past stagnation. Zariah knows she must fight this battle on her own, within herself. Her past helped her in only one aspect of health, like the physical, but not all aspects, which led to an imbalance of the whole health of mind, body, and spirit together simultaneously. In the beginning of her writing, she points out she feels physically healthy but mentally and internally she is not one hundred percent. This recognition is insightful because although she may be physically strong and capable of power, she realizes that mentally and internally she is unbalanced. The imbalance is caused by a hyper focus on past occurrences with others and herself. She states, "At times it feels like I am internally fading away in the abyss." With this metaphorical comparison, she shows to others that an over analysis of the situation does not nurture positivity. Dwelling on past occurrences negatively in a mental and internal matter does not serve the balanced health of the mind, body, and spirit, because it reproduces a stagnant way of pessimistic thinking. The writer even reveals how health and nostalgia are connected: "I'm getting back to the healthy life, the healthy mind, and the healthy body I once had before. To be the best I've ever been, I need to be more open-minded, more confident, and more spiritual like I was before." A person who feels inferior to others views life as something that is bound to hurt. The physically healthy person is open to the challenges of life and spirit.

Past trauma and failures do not have to be prophecies. Unfortunately, people can be led into a cycle of thinking that expects negativity. Freire might argue that

objective academic critical thinking and writing serve only to focus on the negative, the critique. In society this type of negative rhetoric is what bombards us in education and mass media propaganda. This type of thinking does not serve one holistically because it does not desire to change or grow in the present. Over-intellectualizing the past can lead one to more negativity. This traps someone deeper into believing that the past is the only way of viewing life that controls one's present and future.

Incarceration can trap someone into this type of negative categorical thinking, because they are limited physically in isolation as "bad" criminals deserving of punishment. At the same time, Zariah desires to grow from the past, and not focus on the hurt experiences from her relationship with others. She realizes she lost a connection and remembrance of a past self that was once mentally, internally, and physically healthy all at once. Being in tune with all aspects of holistic health, not just critical thinking, helps one appreciate one's peace with actual *feelings*, that which is outside of pure logic. This *feeling* is what matters most, or as ancient philosopher Plotinus categorizes as *To Timiotaton*, which is not in an objective myth, but in the real human heart.

Chapter Three: Male Incarceration

In the male-tracked carceral system, machismo and ultra-machismo are the power norms that rule. The female-tracked system does not function with a strict macho code and is much more flexible with gender expression. For example, it is not necessarily accurate that masculine females will hold the most power in female prison society. Same-sex relationships are not taboo as in male prison society. In the male

system, however, there is a strict code of behavior and hierarchy associated with gender identity. Those who exhibit more traditionally masculine and macho behaviors are rewarded with power, such as the attacker-always-wins mindset— and are relegated to the top of the tier of prison gang power. Those whose behavior violates the traditionally masculine identity are penalized, attacked, and relegated to the lowest strata of the prison society. For example, transgender males are usually outcast and dehumanized. Nevertheless, the heart and care that can be found for oneself through self-empowering literature and art in incarceration can lead to a life-changing vulnerability and insight that can fuel positive transformation.

This first article goes against the attacker-always-wins mindset. Here a young man Olegario, already in the adult prison system, uses the idea of loving protection to successfully safeguard himself from trauma.

“Had To Go Back to My Childhood”

“I had to go back to my childhood and reflect on my past traumas. I had to get in touch with my inner child, writing a letter to the hurt and lonely child within me. Letting him know I was there for him and not to be afraid because I was there to protect him from anybody that tried to harm him in any way, shape or form.

I learned that every time my inner child acted up, I did something wrong by committing a crime. That was how my inner child lashed out through my actions. Keeping in touch with my inner child gave me the

courage to seek change, learning that whatever crime I committed does not define me and that there are a lot of good qualities I am proud of.

I changed my thought process, and with that I changed my moral values and I learned to love myself once again.”

The Beat Within allows and encourages Olegario to revisit his past memories and forgive himself for his past and present mistakes, writing to and remembering the innocence of his younger inner child. He writes a letter to his hurt and lonely past child-self. He writes to his inner child as his own father figure, one who wants to protect this inner child from any harm. He makes the assessment that whenever his inner child acted out, he committed a crime. Olegario showcases how forgiving and healing one’s past inner child self can help nurture a present perspective into a positive, healing, empathetic one that does not involve negative or vengeful viewpoints attached to painful trauma. He chooses to follow an optimistic spirit with his inner child, because through remembering his inner child he remembers his innocent humanity. He is protecting his younger-self and forgiving his present adult-self. By going back in time to heal his inner child, he remembers the roots of self that guide him to love himself for healing, growing, and learning in this world.

Like Olegario, in *Poet Warrior*, Joy Harjo, former national poet laureate, is vulnerable to us, and we as readers, are her listeners that can empathize with her. By sharing his story, Olegario is not only helping himself but others, too. Harjo also shares her spiritual growth to liberate others:

We are all here to serve each other. At some point we have to understand that we do not need to carry a story that is unbearable. We can observe the story, which is mental; feel the story, which is physical; let the story go; which is emotional; then forgive the story; which is spiritual, after which we use the materials of it to build a house of knowledge. (Harjo 20)

Harjo, addressing her audience in the present-tense, “we are all here to serve each other” allows us to understand her writing from a collective perspective that is supposed to teach us in a generous way. She shares with us that we do not have an obligation to hold onto past painful stories. In isolation, through writing a fictional letter to his child self, Olegario was able to experience liberation through positively healing his spirit. He no longer needs to think of himself as a violent criminal who must attack others before they attack him. Instead he becomes a noble knight protecting the innocent child within him.

In this next entry, Uz also shows us the need to remain fluid, to let go of the past and to simply continue moving in this existence. He does not offer any cliché solution and does not tell us exactly where he is going, but he knows he must simply go on.

“Shaping Myself Today” by Uz, San Francisco

“I agree that we can learn from other’s mistakes. Unfortunately, I learned from my very own. I see it as life lessons, to be honest. I’ve grown from my past mistakes. I am able to channel my best self now more than before. I was super young and defiant as a young teen and early teen. I’ve guided myself. I didn’t have a big home, a dad, or

a real positive role model in my life. I experienced from my decision making the consequences that came with it. So, I moved differently and ended up being.”

Here, incarcerated male Uz reflects on how he did not have a positive role model in his childhood. Because of this, he reacted with defiance in his youth. Now, Uz is conscious and attentive to the ideas of spiritual growth, care, and reflection upon life in the present. After admitting to his mistakes he is able to channel his “best self”. This vulnerability in admitting his mistakes reveals spiritually, emotionally, and physically an effort to heal from past trauma. He sees his mistakes as life lessons. His present incarcerated self understands the innocence of his younger teen self, “I was super young and defiant as a young teen and early teen.” He accepts his actions which led to consequences. He accepts with self-determination in the present to now “channel his best self.” All his actions led him to “being” in the present. By being empathetic to his younger defiant teen self, he is able to reflect on how the past, present, and future are occurring all at once, and it is one’s intention in the present that shapes one’s view. He was not able to tap his consciousness in this way before, rather he was involved with being a defiant teen trying to understand the world. Now from this fluid consciousness view, he is able to see himself in a light that admits to what his intentions are. Here the writer’s intention is to do good for his best self. Note that in this writing, Uz does not use overly-masculine concepts to define his present reality. Even though he had no father or “positive role model”, Uz is not angry or vengeful. Instead, he is philosophical and simply desires to move “differently” in “being”, in the full-force of that word.

The metaphysics of “being” affect us all, but in the academic world, these ideas are ignored. The idea of what matters most to us individually is a taboo topic that is not confronted in any standard class. In fact, the concept of God is a forbidden idea. In this next writing, the incarcerated juvenile confronts his relationship with God, and *The Beat Within* provides him a platform for his exploration.

“My Spiritual Journey”

“My name is Sergio and I’m in here being charged with three felonies and a misdemeanor. I just recently got booked into Juvenile Hall. My trial hasn’t even started but I’ve made my first appearance in court.

I’ve been a Christian almost all my life but for a while I started to separate myself from the church and even God. He’s been by my side my whole life, and I just took it for granted. I’ve made a lot of mistakes in my life but he’s always been with me. Even now that I pushed myself away for a while.

To be honest, it’s not looking good for me but all I can do is put my faith in God and repent and hope for the best. There was a time when nobody answered my calls but thank God that on Thursday, one of my calls was answered. I’m not gonna say her name, but she means a lot to me and I missed talking to her. Every day I get excited to use the phones so I can talk to her again. To be honest, I think talking to her has kept me from going crazy in here.

I've also been thinking about how I've taken my parents for granted as well, and I hope to see them on Sunday for visits. I'm gonna tell them how much I love them and miss them and how I should have given them more respect."

As this young male is awaiting trial, he reflects spiritually on what led him to this moment. In the objective academic setting, discussion of God or spirit is forbidden, even though it is what matters most to many individuals. By being able to write about God in *The Beat Within*, Sergio finds the answers he actually needs. In the actual writing, he does not go into specific details explaining why he got incarcerated, but reveals he has been charged with three felonies and a misdemeanor. He may have to spend a substantial time incarcerated once he is convicted. With this uncertainty awaiting at trial, the writer reflects on his religious beliefs, and how he has always had a spiritual connection to God. He reveals he always believed, but separated himself from that connection by personal choice. He humbles himself in understanding that God has always been there for him, despite his personal human mistakes. He understands that he must suffer the consequences for his actions, and asserts the only answer to his situation is to repent and have faith in God. He does not try to hide his flaws or sins, and chooses positive optimism despite his situation. He asserts that he took his connection with God for granted. The word granted means something leased to you, something given to you. Taking something for granted is like taking something given to you and choosing to forget it through wanting something else.

We see how our speaker displays an authentic desire to grow. He now values a connection to God, which exhibits strength and healing. Although he identifies the Christian church as part of his history, he does not discuss rules and regulations as routes to salvation. Instead he identifies actions that are connected to a deeper concept of God or spirit. He no longer wants to forget about God or his parents, those who he has taken for granted because he acknowledges how they deserve a certain care which he calls “respect”. He alludes to a forgiving merciful kind of God, which allows him to forgive himself, even if the system does not. Sergio repents. Originally, this idea of repentance is supposed to be one of the main goals of the carceral system.

Penitentiary is actually rooted in the Christian ideal of repentance. Unfortunately, the modern carceral system cares mostly about punishment. But Sergio has gone beyond that punishment by admitting his faults and acting in order to build a better spiritual life, one where he will ask for mercy from his parents and, most importantly, he will share love, which he regards as the best goal in keeping with God.

As noted in his writing, Sergio has parents and the concept of God, but what happens when a young man does not have positive parents or the peace of spirit? Like the incarcerated author below, one may turn to the streets to find some type of purpose. Gucci begins his story with a song quote.

“Trauma Changed Me”

“I stood 10 toes, I couldn’t fold or panic, these streets a turn a good kid into a cold lil savage.” -Polo G

This quote hit me hard for real because I got a good heart. I didn't always envision myself as this person I have become. I ain't gone cap, trauma hit me at a young age, so it changed my thought process early in life. But I believe the younger me before all the pain and trauma would be ashamed of the man I had become.

I remember being super young and telling my mom I can't wait to get married and have kids. So, I would sit down and watch TV with them while smoking a cigarette and drinking a beer. I seen all the other grown-ups do that, so I thought that's what men do. The streets are cold. Give her love and she gives you pain. These streets will steal yo money, yo heart, yo loved ones, and above all else yo' hopes and dreams. Any wise man can tell you, once you lose hope you lose in life."

Here, a music lyric about surviving life on the streets serves as inspiration and strength for this young man who realizes he is not a criminal but rather a warrior who has withstood trauma. He could choose to be pessimistic, bitter, hateful, and paranoid of others because of the circumstances he experienced, but he chooses to acknowledge his resilience and strength which is what gives him a positive and optimistic viewpoint in life. The good intention of his heart is proven through him simply existing. He provides an anecdote about how when he was a kid, he would tell his mom he wanted to get married and have kids—while they would watch TV, smoke, and drink beer. He captures the beauty and innocence of his younger child self yearning for love, purpose, and meaning contrasted against the stark brutality of his home life. He grew up watching his family drink and smoke, and interpreted that as a normal phenomena, so he followed in their footsteps. The street life that included

drinking and smoking was one that did not fulfill the existential aspirations of his younger self; therefore, he feels shame. The streets led him to becoming robbed and heartbroken, literally and spiritually. Through these experiences, he realizes it is hope that is what keeps him going, because without that, he would lose his soul on the streets.

In losing hope one loses sight of what is important and what is meaningful to them. He does not use the word God, nor does he offer a practical solution to his problems. He understands how his unresolved trauma and street survival mentality dominated his existence, which led to him losing his sense of self, feeling, and purpose. The streets make people do things for a set of reasons, either for monetary, individual, or power gains. He relays to us that a wise man once told him that once you lose hope, you lose in life. The wise man is actually the writer himself, who spreads hope and wisdom to us through his spiritual consciousness. Hope gives faith and love to ourselves and to others so that we can all grow, learn, and explore. The writer's younger self aspired for love. Surviving on the streets turned him into a person that was part of the matrix of the streets. He became numb. He gave the streets his love, but all it could give him back was pain. Yet he is not vengeful. He is hopeful, and this is his first step to spirituality.

In the worst case scenarios, like the situations these youth are in, it is spirit that saves us. It does not need to be religion or the word God that helps us. Through the above writing, we can see that spirit can be secular, through something like the

vehicle of hope. In the writing below that serves as the conclusion of this section, we witness D's metaphysical battle between good and evil, Love versus Hate.

"Love Versus Hate"

"We hate so fast and we love too slow." – Pink

Honestly, I do agree with this week's quote. It made me think differently because I thought it was normal to hate people. Hatred comes very naturally and easy to most people. Small, simple things can tick you off to hate someone and that hate can last as long as you live. Shoot, nowadays it's common to hate people that you never even met.

When you think about gangs, most the people who despise each other never even saw each other in person, only over social media. Years and years of bloodshed and hatred over situations and people that don't even involve them. I cannot be a hypocrite because I have been involved in this hatred and have hated people for the dumbest, smallest reasons.

I think the reason hatred is so easily passed out and shown is because it has no emotional consequences. Mutual hatred can have many physical consequences, maybe engaging in a fight, and if severe enough, may even cost death. I guess these consequences are easy to look past.

Why? I have no idea because those endings are way more severe than a broken heart. With love, you have to have trust. Trust that the person will love you back and never betray you. The emotional pain that love can give is indescribable. No one wants to

feel that disappointment and heartbreak, so they do not engage in love. Me personally, I'm scared to love because I've only got the bad experience part of it.

Another reason for why love is not easily given out is because they never were introduced to love and how to express themselves. "Tough love" often does more harm than good. It causes those to not show emotions besides anger, and anger goes hand in hand with hate.

People grow up being bred to hate people and have that hatred following them throughout their lives. So why is it so easy to look past the outcomes of hate that are way more severe? But people are scared of the confrontational outcome that may come with love. It's not even a for sure thing with love as it is with hate."

The insightful and honest assessment of how it is easier to hate than love highlights D's passion to grow from a previous state of hate that caused only violent and bitter consequences. Hate involves individual pride, gang solidarity, and protection of vanity that people have grown up in and have been taught is the right and only way to protect oneself if one wants to gain respect and survive. With hate, there is a strength and solidarity in being in control of the hateful thoughts and violence towards others. D questions normalized gang violence. He asks why severe consequences out of hate are looked at as normal when it involves death for petty reasons. D reveals he hated others based on petty reasons that he was not personally involved in. He assesses that people choose hate because there is a known outcome, whereas with love you have to trust another person and be vulnerable with your own feelings and actions; this vulnerability leads to an unknown outcome. By the end of

this writing, D learns to love himself. D admits he has been scared of love. This admittance of what he fears reveals an utter honesty that could not be articulated in an academic essay. He simply tells the truth, regardless of how it conflicts with gang ideology.

D can no longer hide under the mask of hate. D understands that “tough love” actually does more harm than good. Some well-intentioned people think that by being strict and authoritarian with their tough love, they can actually help others escape the cycle of hate. The problem, however, is that tough love still includes vanity, pride, and ego. Freire would argue you cannot use the oppressor’s tools for transformation purposes. In tough love, there is a desire to control the love, instead of allowing it to be natural, which sometimes requires tears, vulnerability, and weakness. Tough love does not want to accept the weakness or frailty of humans. D admits to his own mistakes and weakness, and in doing so, he is liberated from entrenched gang ideals and propaganda.

All these young incarcerated writers are exploring spirit, which is what matters most to them, even if it does not gain them good grades or future employment, which are the promises that academia makes for why we should write. No, these writers write to feel and to live, and by writing about it and caring about their own writing, they are more likely to actually take action on their ideas. UC Santa Cruz Alumnus, activist and writer, bell hooks in *All About Love* describes the importance of what commitment to the spiritual life means: “A commitment to a spiritual life requires us to do more than read a good book or go on a restful retreat. It

requires conscious practice, a willingness to unite the way we think with the way we act. Spiritual life is first and foremost about commitment to a way of thinking and behaving that honors principles of inter-being and interconnectedness.” Hooks illuminates how the spiritual life involves both thinking and action which is interconnected to how we view ourselves and others. D reveals a spiritual consciousness that wants to be in tune with conscious loving reflection and action at the same time.

Chapter Four: Art

This following section is dedicated to *The Beat Within* art. As stated earlier, the mass incarceration that had its height in the 1990’s created a new identity for those most oppressed. Many Chicanx and Latinx peoples embraced the new perspectives that were forced upon them. They became master artists behind the walls. Their artworks cover various themes that encompass spiritual growth. Created in isolation, the artists reflect on past life experiences of love and mistakes, utopian aspirations, and stark existential truths. The drawings are magically real, spiritual, and imaginative. In isolation prisoners learned patience and creative discipline by drawing, with fine pen or pencil, collage murals on blank paper.

Murals in barrios were popular since the late 60’s and early 70’s during the Chicano movement. Entire neighborhoods became canvases for art. Streets like Balmy Alley in San Francisco’s Mission district were decorated with colorful murals

that depicted history, colonization, politics, nature, and spirit. These themes eventually found their way into prison art, but once in prison, the art also included street life images, such as the famous comedy and tragedy drama masks, known in prison culture as Smile Now, Cry Later masks. These intricate drawings, such as the ones depicted below, would be drawn on envelopes, in letters, and eventually even on skin. The collage mural fine pen style drawings became an internationally renowned style of tattoo art known as Black and Gray Tattoo Art.

Through this embrace of horrible circumstances in incarceration, they created art that highlighted their wisdom and helped others survive through the storm. Even behind barbed wire, they are able to tap into spirit and break through steel bars. Like in the art reproduction below, the artist imagines another dimension of nature, even while they are locked in a little room. In these collage mural drawings, the artists transcend objectivity by depicting various worlds merging together.

Unfortunately, our current urban environment has separated mind from body— humans from living nature, which has led humans to justify extraction and exploitation for profit purposes. The reclaiming of oneness between land, body, mind, and language can help us recognize the impact of our human histories on our space, land, and bodies. Note that text requires different layers of imagination: one must read and imagine the abstractions that are being presented. These drawings show clearly yet in a complex fashion the interconnections between various images. The viewer does not need to digest text and then imagine. In these drawings the images are there for us to follow and feel.

In the art showcased below, these artists have emanated a realism through their drawings that highlight the multi-faceted aspects of consciousness and history that include past, present, and future working simultaneously. Walter D. Mignolo, in *Delinking* shares the importance of delinking our attachment to a singular Eurocentric epistemology that promotes a rhetoric of modernity and rationality based on the notion of Totality: “the complicity between modernity/rationality is the exclusionary and totalitarian notion of Totality... that negates, excludes, occludes the difference and possibilities of other totalities” (452). Mignolo introduces the concept of pluriversality— which appreciates and is open to connecting and identifying with various epistemologies across the world that are not fixated on an objective singular Eurocentric knowledge based on the rhetoric of modernism— “De-linking presupposes to move toward a geo- and body politics of knowledge that on the one hand denounces the pretended universality of a particular ethnicity (body politics), located in a specific part of the planet (geo-politics), that is, Europe where capitalism accumulated as a consequence of colonialism. De-linking then shall be understood as a de-colonial epistemic shift leading to other-universality, that is, to pluri-versality as a universal project” (453).

To illustrate Mignolo’s points, we can analyze art. For example, the collage murals below show how time is transcended when the modern locomotive drives through the Aztec pyramids, while famed revolutionary leader Emiliano Zapata and an Aztec shaman both exist together. At the center of it all, connected by various birds, butterflies, and the cosmos, is the depiction of the human hands holding a

bloody heart. The feminine identity also is important. In the drawing there is a pluriversality of masculine images contrasted against strong and tender female images. The ancient and the modern are intertwined as the same destiny. It is important we understand time as a spiral, not as linear or chronological. For example, Native American and indigenous Mayan epistemologies view death not as an ending but a continuation of many different intertwined connections. These types of collage mural drawings represent different epistemologies through the artists' creative mindset of pluriversality that promotes empathy, love, appreciation, and realism.

These fine-line black and white pen/pencil drawings capture the realism of what history, the present moment, and existence means to the incarcerated artists. The collage murals on paper are drawn with patience in an isolated incarcerated setting and encompass the pluriversality of many dimensions. The concepts are literally connected through drawings of hair, smoke, images emerging from other images, butterflies, Mexica history, pyramids, astronomy, technology, and nature. As stated earlier, these types of stark intricate drawings became so fascinating that the outside world esteemed them, and this style has now become popular international art in the form of Black and Gray Tattoo Art. This style of art also inspires the other drawing below, which is much more modern and politically based. In this artwork we see the collage mural style at play. Magically real hands are holding a world in chaos. Protestors are fighting against capitalism in a modern yet ancient setting. The art created behind the walls has transcended itself and become a voice for action in the outside world.

Figure 2: Unnamed artist, Latino male juvenile, age 20; Los Angeles, California

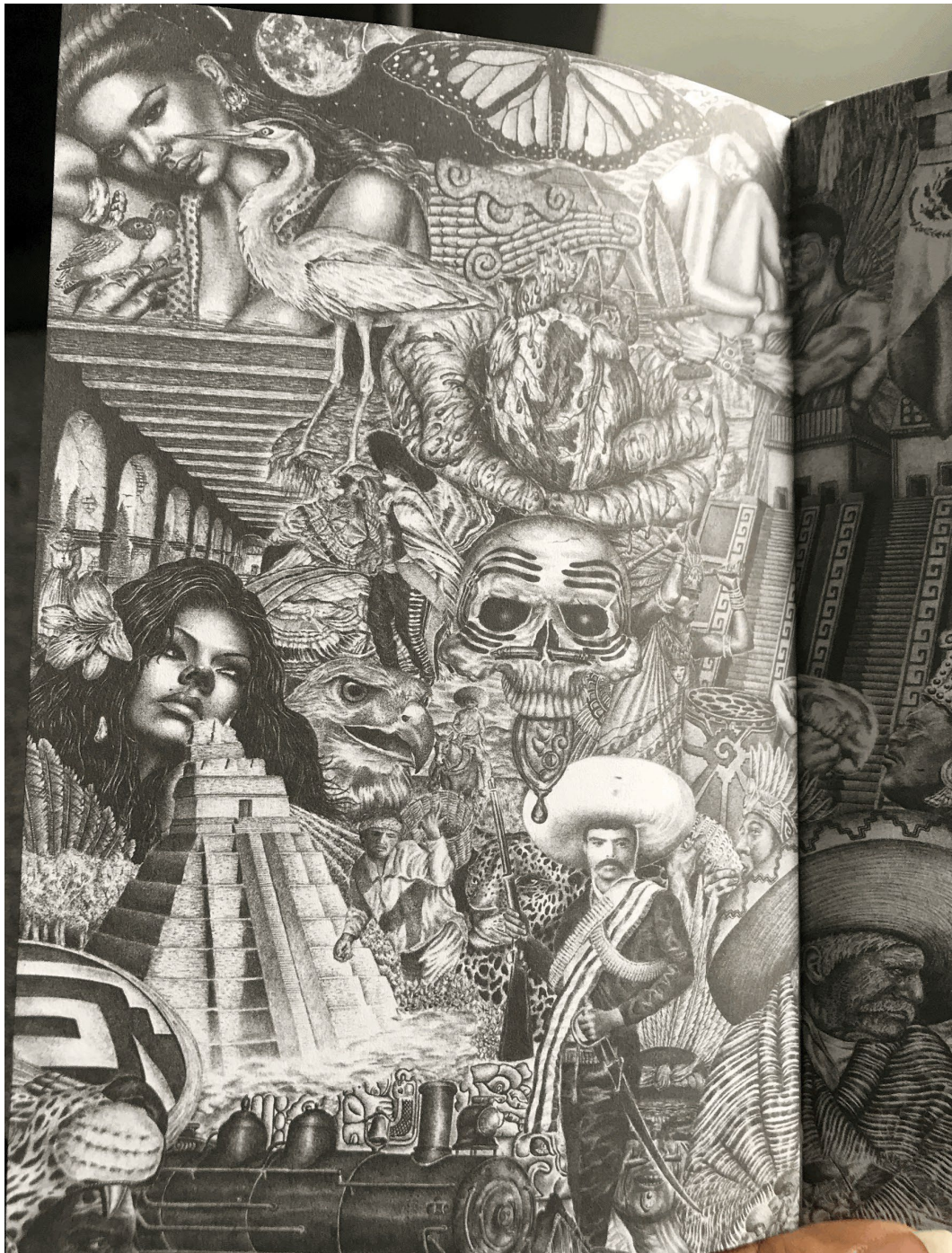
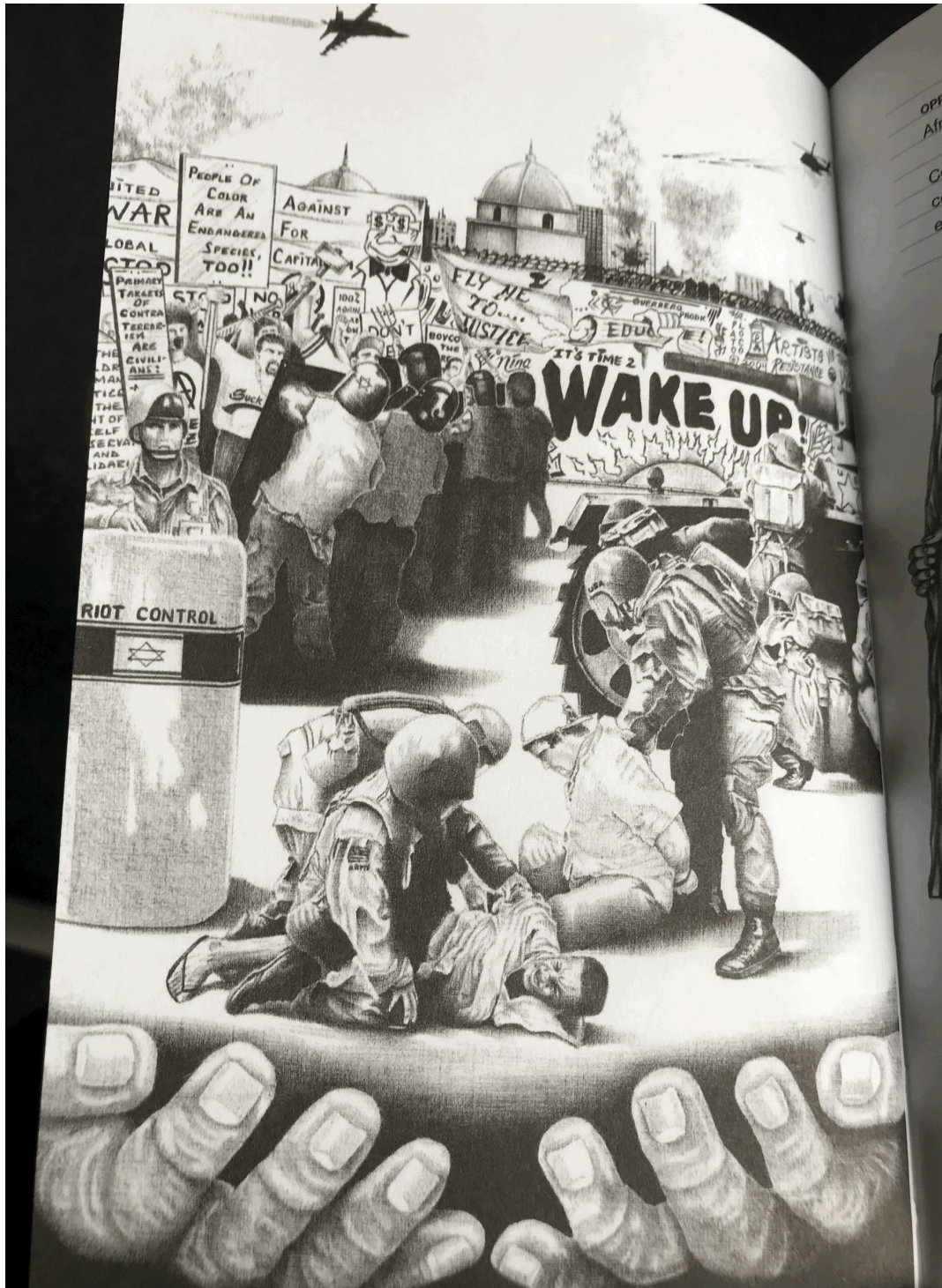


Figure 3: Unnamed artist; African American male juvenile, age 17; California



Conclusion: Time to Change

Through the literature and art shown above, we can see how the writing and art from incarcerated youth provide a profound insight that is both conscious and yearning to heal from past, present, and future trauma. This literature and art not only liberates them but also can liberate us from stereotypes about people of color and dehumanization of others. Through their writing and art, we can learn love for those most oppressed—the incarcerated.

The Beat Within's literature and art are about liberation through transformation, a radical shift about how we view the power and authenticity of subjective first person writing and of incarcerated art. This last entry combines both art forms.

“Time to Change”

This piece from *The Beat Within* combines both art and text for a pluriversality that is simply not allowed in most academic settings. In traditional curriculums, text is supposed to stand alone. The title “Time to Change” is befitting of what must happen in education if our youth are to stay engaged. Right now in the Bay Area and throughout the United States, college enrollment has plummeted. In the Bay Area, since the outbreak of Covid in 2020, San Francisco State University, Cal State East Bay, and Sonoma State, have recorded over a twenty percent decrease in enrollment (Jaschik). Students seem to be rejecting the pure objective standards that bullied them into romanticizing education as an ideal. *The Beat Within* shows that

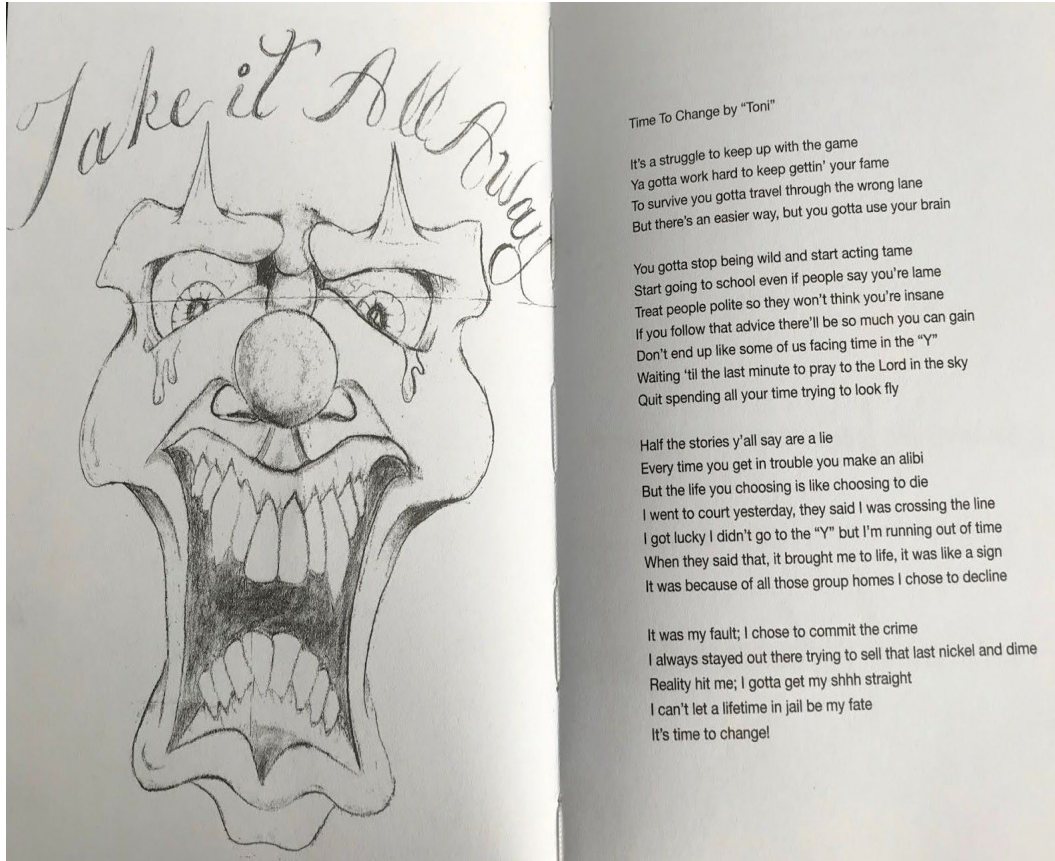
education is about more than just getting a job. Authentic education is supposed to be about liberation. Literature and art are praxis.

In “Time to Change” the poet Toni expresses how the streets did not benefit his well being. He is incarcerated, and now solely due to his existence, they say he is crossing the line. This is an absurd judgment being placed upon him, because he is much more than just a criminal that has crossed a line. Toni comes to a revelation that it is time to change the ways of the past, and start thinking about practical and spiritual plans for positive growth that safely support one holistically, financially, mentally, emotionally, and intellectually. He exposes this feeling of being in limbo which imprisons, punishes, and confines him to a singular type of thinking, which views things dichotomously, either in a good or bad way. One is either a good clone or a bad criminal. This type of thinking also applies to an outer world survival on the streets mentality because one must try to advance financially, mentally, or physically according to a street code, which involves using the oppressors’ hierarchical status and identity. The path to support oneself spiritually and emotionally was hindered by an alternative individual path influenced by surviving in the environment. Now in incarcerated isolation, he realizes all the things he chased after or pursued were things that did not support him holistically; therefore, he realizes the futility in staying in the same stagnant state and boldly asserts that it is time to change.

The drawing that accompanies this poem is of an enraged clown with tears streaming down his face and an open screaming fang-toothed mouth in turmoil. The phrase “Take it all away” is above the clown. The take it all away phrase means that

we must take away all the vain aspirations of the world because they do not support one holistically. The clown identity serves as a mask for one's authentic self. The clown identity attempts to hide the emotion and vulnerability of an individual by putting on a performance of ultra-silliness. The clown identity distracts and numbs oneself from diving deeper into confronting individual identity. The "take it all away" is an effort to gain some balance with one's emotions and physical self. The act of being a clown does not entertain or humor him any more. Here his vulnerable human tears and emotions break through the confines of the clown identity. The emotion of crying illuminates spiritual truth in the present moment. Instead of putting on a humorous act, he reveals his inner self. It is a necessary transformation that is akin to an exorcism, a spiritual healing.

Figure 4: from *Illustrations from the Inside, The Beat Within*



The Beat Within offers us stories and art that we not only reflect upon but that we feel in our spirit. We feel it because it deals with the real individual human experience written by humans suffering, yet striving day by day, month by month, and year by year in the worst circumstances, yet still finding hope, even in hell.

Smile Now, Cry Later—the eternal cycle of the heart, literally *The Beat Within*:

The spirit of Love.

Figure 5: by Omar Turcios; 21 years old; San Francisco, California



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