

W O R D S U N C A G E D



Monthly Newsletter

October 2019

“So on We Breath” Opening

by Eleanor Carpenter

This month, Words Uncaged unveiled “So on We Breath,” a new photo exhibit on display at the WU gallery and workspace in DTLA. The show consists mostly of polaroids borrowed from the personal collections of individuals currently



serving time at Lancaster prison. Some of the men featured in the show have noted that these photographs are the most prized of their very few possessions.

Most of these photographs, dating as far back as the 70’s and 80’s, contain images of the men with their loved ones during visits at the prison. Many of the families share a similar feature; they clutch each other tightly and smile in front of hand painted murals of tropical beaches or outer space. These backgrounds attempt but ultimately fail to conceal the actual space in which the images were captured, filled not with palm trees or starry skies but restrictive signage and barred windows.

One Words Uncaged participant and poet Anthony McDuffie, who was released from Lancaster this year, spoke at the opening event. He pointed out how walking by each photograph in the exhibit felt like peering into the cell of each of these men, as most of them are still locked up. He also shared a poem about the long-lasting structural and psychological effects of slavery entitled, “Mama, They Told me to Forget

about Slavery,” in which he also expressed a fear of appearing vulnerable in front of men, hence the address to his mother. George Sanchez, another young poet who was incarcerated at the age of 12 and just released at 18, also read from his first book of published poetry. One of Words Uncaged’s major projects is helping these poets publish their incredible work, which they have produced mountains of in the silence of their cells.

Just outside the exhibit, a pop-up prison cell constructed by Literature and Engineering students from CSULA was also featured as part of the event. Inside, the recorded voices of the men in the photographs played for onlookers. The cell has been built as true to size as possible in order to provide a spatial experience of prison alongside the visual and audial experience.

Tobias Tubbs, a prominent leader and mentor in the Words Uncaged program, who served 30+ years before his LWOP sentence was commuted, had these memorable words to say about healing after prison: “People will tell you what you need if you just listen.” These words point toward the future of Words Uncaged, as it will focus on providing narrative therapy to portions of Los Angeles’ marginalized communities. Narrative therapy is a form of healing that strives to hear,



analyze and ultimately rewrite the stories we and others tell us about ourselves, as, according to Narrative Therapy theorists, these stories either limit or expand the possibilities we can envision for our lives. This is good news, as individual healing is a vital step in the larger project of healing an ultimately broken criminal justice system.

Expressions Uncaged: Spiritual Advisors Inside the Execution Chamber (continued from the September newsletter) by Brian Ortiz

In focusing on the ‘untimely’ technicality aspect of Ray’s case, the Supreme Court majority completely ignored the true essence of Ray’s argument: freedom of religious expression. Had the state not enforced a policy that allowed a Christian chaplain to be inside the death chamber, while excluding every other spiritual advisor, then Ray likely would not have a substantial claim to stand on.; but that’s not what the state of Alabama did in this case. The procedural grounds to vacate Ray’s stay of execution was a narrow decision, a 5-4 decision that denied Ray’s petition and proceeded with the execution. In Judge Kagan’s dissent, she provides an opposition about the majority decision and how they overlooked Ray’s main point about Alabama’s religious biased policy. Judge Kagan said, “Under that policy, a Christian prisoner may have a minister of his own faith accompany him into the execution chamber to say his last rites. But if an inmate practices a different religion—whether Islam, Judaism, or any other—he may not die with a minister of his own faith by his side. That treatment goes against the Establishment Clause’s core principle of denominational neutrality” (*Ray v. Dunn*, 2019). In order to justify a form of religious discrimination, the state of Alabama should have shown or demonstrated that it was serving a necessary interest, in this case, the significant interest was the security of prison proceedings. But prohibiting every spiritual advisor outside of the prison’s own Christian chaplain, appears to serve no interest at all regarding the execution procedures of a death row inmate. It does however show a bias of religious preference.

Furthermore, she discusses the state’s policy of permitting a “spiritual advisor of the condemned” to be in the presence. She said, “... that statute provides that both the chaplain of the prison and the inmate’s spiritual adviser of choice “may be present at an execution.” It makes no distinction between persons who may be present within the execution chamber and those who may enter only the viewing room. And

the prison refused to give Ray a copy of its own practices and procedures (which would have made that distinction clear)” (*Ray v. Dunn*, 2019). The most crucial aspects of Ray’s claim regarding Alabama’s own policy was about who is allowed inside the chambers, the denial to receive a copy of the policy, and the belief that Ray should’ve known better and not have waited until the eleventh hour to file his petition. The obscure reasons to deny his requests undermines the Establishment Clause protection under the First Amendment and allowing a Christian chaplain but not another religious spiritual advisor appears to blatantly endorse one religion over the other.

What would the courts have decided if Domineque was a Christian, and Alabama only offered Muslim Imams to be in the presence at the time of his execution? In this hypothetical, it wouldn’t be farfetched to believe that the Supreme Court would’ve likely ruled in Ray’s favor. After the Supreme Court’s decision, on February 7, 2019, Domineque Ray was executed by lethal injection. For death row inmate’s like Domineque Ray, they hardly get the benefit of a doubt regarding civil liberty protections and it can be very difficult to have an objective view that doesn’t discriminate these individuals and their basic rights. But that’s why there’s laws in place to prevent biased, or discrimination in the institutions of the United States. The most telling passage from Judge Kagan’s dissent is when she said, “The Eleventh Circuit wanted to hear that claim in full. Instead, this Court short-circuits that ordinary process—and itself rejects the claim with little briefing and no argument—just so the State can meet its preferred execution date” (*Ray v. Dunn*, 2019). I wholeheartedly agree with this sentiment. Although the act of executing Dominique Ray for the crimes he committed is a just act, the circumstances that lead to his last living moments at Holman Correctional Facility were ultimately unjust.

GEORGINA’S LEGISLATIVE COLUMN

Senate Bill 1412- Criminal History Inquiries

Senate Bill 1412 stops employers from having access to arrest inquiries that did not result in a conviction, a diversion program, or a conviction that has been judicially dismissed or ordered sealed and stops them from using criminal history information in employment decisions. The only way an employer can now use criminal history against someone is when an employer cannot by law hire someone with a “particular” conviction. This “particular” conviction is described in the bill as, “a conviction for specific criminal conduct or a

category of criminal offenses prescribed by any federal law, federal regulation or state law that contains requirements, exclusions, or both, expressly based on that specific criminal conduct or category of criminal offenses.”

This is impactful because how society deals with those accused of crimes speaks more than any propaganda meant to stir the deepest of emotions. When denied employment due to past arrests that did not result in a conviction, a diversion program, a conviction, or that was dismissed, people can fall behind and be forced to actually commit crimes that can result in a conviction- such as theft because they were not employed and could not afford to pay for food to feed their children. This bill seeks to deter employers from accessing those documents to allow people the ability to make something of themselves.

RACE AS A SOCIAL CONSTRUCT

By Dortell Williams

The fact is race is a social construct (Goodman, A.H.; Moses, Y.T., & Jones, J.L. , 2012, p. 1). Race is a constructed social reality that has been enculturated into a culturally accepted truth. Thus, race now maintains a social value that people make meaning of and agree on (Ice, Palczewski & Fritch, 2012, p. 36). In this context, folk taxonomy has narrative value because it has the ability to convey a story that has definitive power (Ice, et al., 2012, p. 19). Of course, this centuries-old “reality” was debunked in 2000 by the Human Genome Project, supporting the theory that humans are one single species, not a polygeny (or a subdivision of species divided by biological differences (Goodman, et al. 2012, p. 28)).

Race as a social construct is a relatively new concept, borne in the aftermath of “British America,” as the colonists obtained more and more land, and their need for a cheap and consistent labor source increased. At the outset, indentured slavery was utilized as a means to at least temporarily fulfill this need. The system of in servitude, “until debts are paid,” proved challenging and inconvenient at best.

Nathaniel Bacon, a Virginia plantation “servant,” proved in servitude untenable in 1697 when he led the most disruptive rebellion of that time. As it were, a few of the first settlers had created a monopoly on land ownership. It seemed the equalitarian American dream was dead upon arrival. The landowners had grown rich beyond measure, exploiting the poor and leaving literally no opportunity for upward mobility. This oligarchical club of colonists grew corrupt and abusive, sparking discontent among the laborers, culminating in Bacon’s organized rebellion. Prior to racial slavery, indentured service and exploitative servitude was a class system, not a racial system. Native Americans, Europeans, Africans and mulattoes were the staple of the impoverished class. This untenable system was slowly transformed through economic and political stratagem, where, through a corrupted Social Darwinism, slaves, black

slaves, could easily be identified. A series of adverse laws were then systematically implemented, stripping Africans of both rights and privileges, and a new culture of racial slavery became normalized (Goodman, et al, 2012, pp. 22-23).

The culture of slavery was brutal, inhumane and codified into law as such. For example, Negroes as they came to be called, were completely disfranchised, recognized by law as less than human (i.e., as property, or three-fifths of a person) (Patterson, 2017, pp. 61, 63), and denied the basic nature of self-actualization through education. Native Americans, Chinese, Japanese and others were also categorized as inferior by the self-described white class.

Post-slavery, the culture of race had firm roots in the American tapestry. Jim Crow laws criminalized so-called free blacks, imposing harsh prison sentences for such minor behavior as flirting with a white woman, going into debt as share croppers (often a trap to force free labor) or vagrancy charges.

Blacks were not the only supposed subset of human beings who were “racialized.” Europeans from origins other than England were also considered inferior, such as European Jews, Poles, Russians and Italians (Goodman et al., 2012, pp. 45-46). The perception of racialized people became a cultural stronghold that persists throughout our modern times.

Native Americans, Blacks, Latinos and even Muslims (whatever “race” category the person is labeled as) are largely viewed as inferior by the dominant culture, as originally set up by the colonizers. The persistence of this race and class structure is made evident, for instance, by the organization Black Lives Matter. BLM was founded on the premise that the executioners of traditional American hegemony (the police) treat blacks and Latinos with a systematic culture of violence (too often deadly violence) that is both brutal and inhumane. This systematic treatment devalues the so-called minority. The devaluation of minority life is reinforced, and often justified, by media stereotypes and subtle messages of deserved marginalization. Message characterizations such as “illegal immigrant,” “Parolee,” “gang-banger,” even if untrue, and many times this is the case, perpetuate the stereotypes of people of color. Often, these stereotypes, or strategies for adversely typifying people, harken back to the days when people of color were described as uniquely “lazy,” “savage,” or “uncivilized.”

As an African American first-term prisoner, sanctions such as life without the possibility of parole neatly fit within this paradigm of devaluation and marginalization. The sentence, in spite of the offense, or a person’s latent human potential, implies that I, along with any other persons so sanctioned, are incorrigible, insignificant and dispensable as human beings. The statistics bear this out as racial “minorities” are disproportionately sentenced to die in prison.

Not only are police and prisons racialized, but likewise is medicine and general healthcare, banking (through redlining, skewed interests rates, et cetera), education (being inferior for minorities in many respects), and just about every statistic that reflects American life. These are the realities of this age-old false social realism.

Glimpses

Polaroid pictures were placed in a line at mid-height along the two white, drywall walls, walls painted by Tobias. The other two walls in the space are glass, see through, transparent. Thomas spoke to the crowd describing the polaroids as windows, windows that allowed him to check up on his brothers. He remembered and aided his brothers in sharing their stories as he told his. "I got you bro," he said in reference to those still on the inside. Sitting off to the side next to George and Lizette at the merch table, I took turns staring out at the crowd and then back to the speaker. When Thomas introduced the metaphor of polaroids as windows to the crowd, I saw people grin at the poetic justice, I heard people comment in appreciation, and I felt the power in the work we do with the many people that come together to do it. These window polaroids are like the stories we rewrite and disseminate. They may not be entirely see through, transparent, but they do allow glimpses into the lives of complex, beautiful humans who deserve to be treated as such. —Erik Vargas



P o e t r y

U n c a g e d



“See Myself”

by Christain Diaz

Sailing, Sailing, is where I will see my reflection in the water,
Where will I be in the near future?
Gazing up at the moon with my queen beside me, gorgeous in her beauty, gorgeous in her soul,
gorgeous in her sweet heart and beauty of all the world—I hold her hand!

Sailing off to an island, swiftly with the wind,
Zamba dances... hips sway side-to-side.
Those are the ocean waves of Rio, smooth sailing, hugs and kisses to my family,
From the moon that boomerangs right back.

The beauty of all the world, I will hold her hand with you as I dream at night!

GRANNY’S COOKING

by Donnell Campbell

Granny’s cooking was always the best,
miles above all the rest.

Black eye peas, mac & cheese, turtle soup
and collard greens.

Smoked ham, dirty rice, pinto beans
and candied yams.

The home smelled of exotic foods from
far away places, putting smiles on many faces.

The chocolate cake stood five layers high.
A mountain of sweetness reaching for the sky.

The lemon meringue, apple, sweet potato
and peach pies shines bright as granny’s eyes.

Banana pudding and peach cobbler didn’t last long,
like the ending of a beautiful song.

Granny’s cooking were magical moments in time,
she’s in heaven now, but these memories are forever mine.



SO ON WE BREATHE: PHOTOS FROM AN INCARCERATED LIFE

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Editors and Contributors: Elanor Carpenter recently earned her master's degree in English at CSULA. She has been involved with Words Uncaged for the past three years. Lizette Toribio is currently earning her master's degree at CSULA. Erik Vargas also earned his master's degree in English at CSULA. Jose Manuel Cubias is a graduate student at CSULA. Christian Diaz, Donnell Campbell, Dortell Williams, thanks for the contributions this months. Georgina is a native of California, She attended Brentwood Science Magnet Elementary, Paul Revere Middle School, Palisades Charter High School, Los Angeles Pierce College, Los Angeles Mission College, and is currently finishing up her Bachelor's degree in Criminal Justice at California State University, Los Angeles. Brian Ortiz is a full-time undergraduate student at Cal State LA (last semester), pursuing an English degree, and also a full-time employee as a paralegal at Hildebrand, McLeod & Nelson LLP that represents injured plaintiffs in civil litigation.

Special Thanks to Bidhan Roy and Ray Adornetto and our board members.

Make sure to check out the radio show **Think Outside the Cage**. Words Uncaged hosts the radio show on the 2nd Saturday of the month. Also listen to **Sentences Podcast** this month for content featuring writing from Words Uncaged alumni. Find it on iTunes or SoundCloud.

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