TWO ROADS

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PUBLISHER'S LETTER

JIM ESTES

I'm a white man, powered by the weary idealism of my mostly forgotten youth to honor the trust of the people of color in my life and try to do a good job for the "Race" edition of our Two Roads magazine. Our team and I are proud to have been asked by Illinois Department of Corrections Director Rob Jeffreys to write an e-zine on race after his landmark interview with us in June.

But I'm white, right? With the backdrop of this summer's brutal police killing of George Floyd, the Kenosha tragedies and subsequent BLM protests looming large, I've felt my role is to shut up, watch and listen. Really listen. And I have.

But I read Ta Nehisi Coates' "Between the World and Me" and he told me I live in a *"Dream of Whiteness".* He tells me we *"dream to forget and the forgetting is habit, is yet another necessary component of the Dream."* He says, *" To awaken them is to reveal they are an empire of humans and, like all empires of humans, are built on the destruction of someone's body. It would stain their nobility, make them vulnerable, fallible, breakable humans."*

Damn. Well, it seems that I, the weary idealist, must wake from my Dream. It'll take years to operationalize this idea in ways large and small, but I'll start with this e-zine. There's been no better way to shake off my "*Dream of Whiteness*" than by reading the 120 submissions for this issue from around the prisons of Illinois. They're great and we'll release another volume soon to capture more work. They made me bigger inside. For now, though, we offer our fist eighteen. Get somewhere comfortable, you're not gonna want to put this volume down. These good folk's stories will make you bigger inside too.

EDITOR'S LETTER

RICKY HAMILTON

First off, greetings and blessings to everyone reading this issue. This particular issue is so important, and I can't express how proud I am to be a part of it, though I must admit, it almost didn't happen.
Dealing with this COVID situation overall has been an extreme challenge, but as of the last month, our facility has been dealing with consecutive positive tests by staff, thus extending 14-day quarantines. While I understand this is all being done for our personal safety, it still has not been easy. The effect of prolonged isolation and inactivity, leaves many of us frustrated, confused and mentally drained.
When Mr. Estes came around for my contribution, I initially passed on the opportunity because my mental reservoir had been shifted to a more critical issue – my own mental health.
Yet, after having a conversation with my cellmate, I realized just how important it was that I get out this message of mental health awareness. Even more, it hit me just how important it is that we finally have our voices heard on an issue which has, since the inception of the 13th Amendment, been the greatest contributing factor to mass incarceration: RACE.
As this national awakening has manifested, I was initially encouraged because it appeared as if – finally – America was getting it. As statement after statement and policy change after policy change came out, I was anxious to see where the winds of change would blow the sails of prison reform efforts, because, let's put it plainly – there is no more racist system in America than its prison and criminal justice system. Again, for those who doubt this, please get familiar with the 13th Amendment, which did not abolish slavery,

but rather only made it legal upon punishment of a crime. Oh, and when you see that word – slavery – please, remember what race of people made up this class of free labor, the same race of people that make up the majority of our prison system. Sadly, much of the real attention has been drawn to distracting narratives instead of prison reform, but thankfully we have a voice in Two Roads to share our stories and hopefully spark reform. So, power to the people! Power not to dominate and repress as we have been, but to overcome all repressive forces acting to deny us life, love, prosperity and liberty.

I am hopeful to see power to the incarcerated people, as well. I am hopeful to see more principles and programs implemented here at Kewanee spread throughout the state – where we as returning citizens are empowered to create peer-led programs like Two Roads, Opportunities on the Open Road (CDL), T.R.E.O (Trade Preparation), Breaking Point Mens' Group, K.E.R.R.G (Employment Research) and Study Group Network.

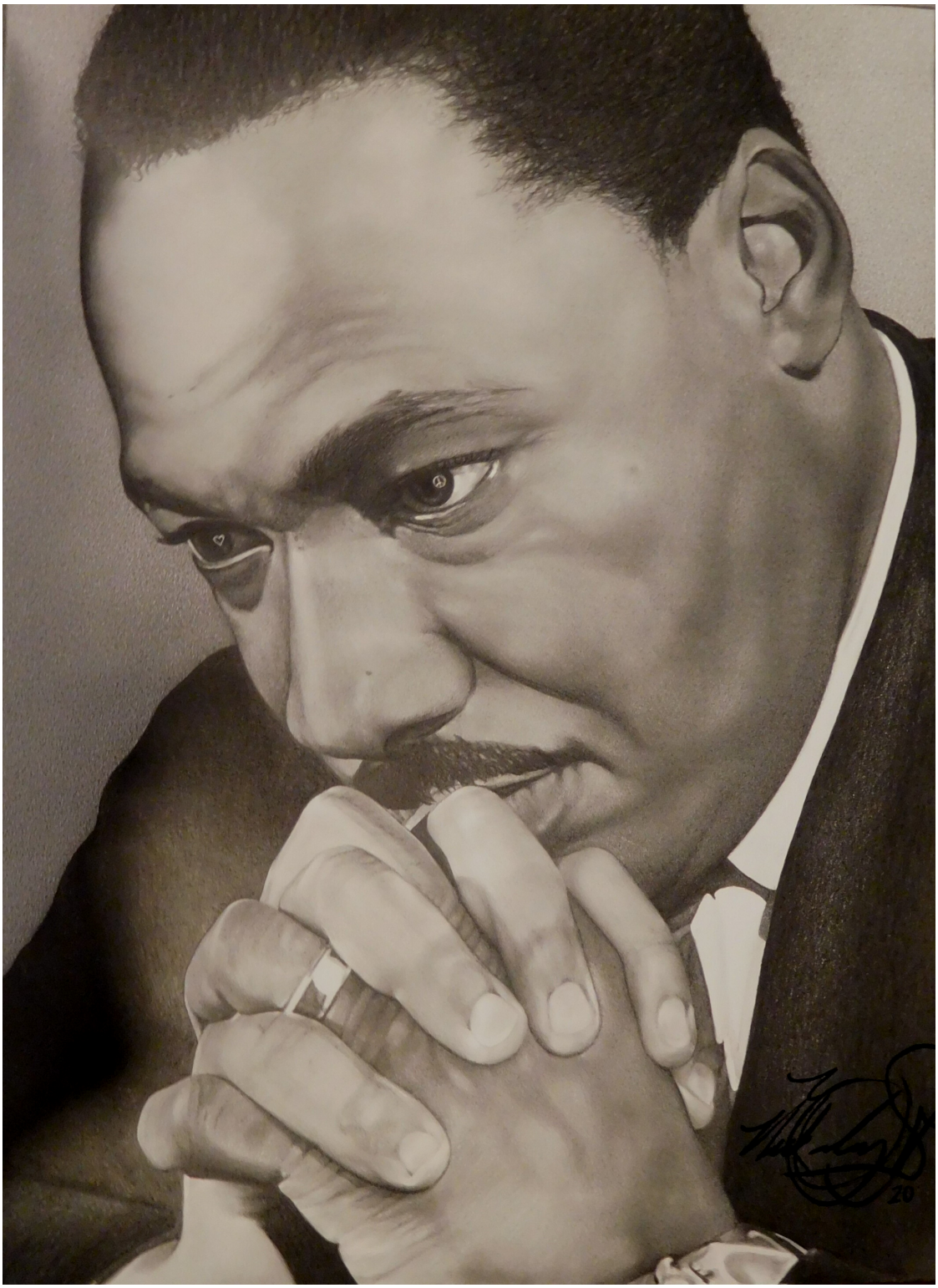
Due to the vision and dynamic leadership by people like Ms. Jennifer Parrack, we have been granted the opportunity to create beneficial programs such as these on the merits of our intentions and not our skin color or former affiliations. It is my unhumble opinion and belief that those closest to the problem are often closest to the solution.

I am proud to announce I know of one such Kewanee creation Director Jeffreys plans to implement throughout the state, and those are instituional city councils. Years ago I suggested this based on a proposal my brother Corey almost got approved in our previous joint.

To see this spreading is amazing and leads me to encourage all of you out there to continue writing proposals and pushing to make this a better system. Two Roads has gotten plenty of letters from men and women alike with great ideas, and we want you all to know we support you! Keep pushing! And keep developing ideas to realize the change you desire.

For everyone who contributed to this latest issue, I want to personally thank you. There were sooo many great submissions. If your piece was not chosen, don't worry; we will be doing more open submissions in the future – again, never give up!

In solidarity,
Ricky Hamilton
Editor in Chief



"Martin Luther King"

Artist-Nick Worley (Pencil Sketch)

THE STORIES THAT CONNECT US

LEO CARDEZ

Kin-Kin, my celly, is young and wild – the sort of kid I'd dreaded to be celled-up with. We didn't have a lot in common and rarely spoke to each other, but during one particularly long lockdown, we finally connected over shared nachos.

To my surprise, I found he was easy to talk to, and quick to grin when he was sharing something close to him. Throughout our few months stuck together we've slowly begun to open up about our fears, hopes, and dreams.

I can always tell when he starts to get lost in a story. He leans forward and pins me with the force of his words. Stories of his past life are tinged with regret; nothing hurts him more than the loss of his daughter. She's still alive, but with his 30-year sentence, in many real ways he is dead to her. She was only two when he came to prison, and he remembers the pink footie pajamas she wore the last time he held her.

I too, lost a daughter because of this place and understand how no moment passes in a day without my whole world still orienting toward her. His words shake my soul.

The depth of his story of multi-generational addiction and brutal abuse pulls the oxygen from the air.

I'm a generation older, from a different culture and yet, I see myself in all his stories. It is as if I'm speaking through him, only the names and dates have changed. I suppose that's the purpose of good storytelling, to be tiny and epic at the same time.

Our best stories are local slices of life. They concern the neighborhoods where we grew up, our closest friends, and favorite things. They are close to the bone, the flesh of our lives. And yet, they're universal too, because they speak to our shared humanity; the fears and hopes we all share as sons, brothers, fathers, and friends.

Kin-Kin's story is rooted in generational poverty, systematic abuse, and institutional prejudice, but his story arc played out like mine: an unfair criminal justice system, fear, loss, and a desperate attempt to find and hold onto hope and purpose in our suddenly cold, austere world.

It is an undeniable truth, when we open our hearts to hear each other's stories, that we

often find ourselves in them. We realize we're not so different after all, and others' experiences become our own. We need to share what we've endured as a means of catharsis and connection. I know that shared storytelling, as part of a larger social justice effort, would break down barriers, shatter stereotypes, and be a conduit to true healing and growth.

Kin-Kin's stories keep unfolding, each as poignant as the last, and as we get to know each other, the recitation and exchange of these stories is where common ground begins to emerge. This is how respect and friendships are built. I've encouraged him, like I do all my fellow inmates, to write his story.

I believe everyone in prison has a novel inside them that needs to be told.

Our shared storytelling puts cracks in the emotional walls that hold us hostage to our preconceptions and prejudices, and eventually the whole thing falls. With enough time and pressure, even the hardest walls will fall.

Our stories hurt and the continuous effort to speak and hear them breaks our hearts. But this is exactly why we must continue. When we share our stories, we are not only explaining what makes us us, but what connects us all.

RACIAL INJUSTICE

SANDRA BROWN

While racial injustice is a normalized aspect of my life experience, the systemic practice of it is most prevalent in my prison experience. I waited years for educational programs while my white peers accessed them with ease. My sentence is allegedly why I remain on wait lists, but my white peers with longer sentences still graduate from these programs. I rely on correspondence courses & scholarships to educate myself. I've devoted time, excellence & invaluable experience at work only to pursue promotional opportunities given to my white peers; two of whom were fairly new to the job & demonstrated little to no experience in the duties required. I & many others advocated for two major prison reforms that allowed sentence credits for long-timers who for years were ineligible. One reform awards sentence credit to prisoners who earned degrees. Though I'm the first incarcerated female in Illinois to earn a Master's degree & am enrolled in an Ed.D program,
I'm excluded from eligibility while many of my white peers receive those credits. For most of my sentence, I've been the only black woman housed in a cell with anywhere from three to seven white women. This is the case with most black women inside. The institution claims to create racial balance in our work & living quarters, but at best this remains an aspiration. I'm subjected to racist comments about black staff members, black prisoners, & egregiously disparaging remarks about the Black Lives Matter movement. When the same people comment on their white peers, no reference is made to color. How do we address this in 2020? I propose that the solving of such issues requires more black justice-impacted people in key criminal justice positions. Those most affected by the problem are best able to solve it. I'm not an angry black woman; just a well-informed one. I'm not biased in my perception of racial injustice; just acutely aware if it. Honest dialogue sincere acknowledgement, & inclusive reforms will promote equality.

"WE'VE COME THIS FAR BY FAITH"

REGINALD E. BROWN

I was born in the late fifties and became aware of this country's racial struggles in the early sixties. This was a time when bigotry and social injustices erupted everywhere, but I was hardly aware of it growing up in my hometown of Bloomington, Illinois – a place that seemed quite integrated.

Then came that Sunday in 1964 when the news blasted across the radio and tv that a black church in Birmingham, Alabama had been bombed and four little girls had been killed while attending Sunday School. White bigotry was the suspect; young as I was, I was frightened and disturbed by the news coverage.

Why had white people done this? Kids were being blown away just because of the color of their skin. We were notified that evening church services should be cancelled. It was not safe for colored people to worship God. But my father felt otherwise. He was a double war ex-army sergeant and a very brave man. He and his brother who lived nearby gathered all the many cousins together and instead of riding, we all walked the five blocks to church over my mother's protest that he would get her babies bombed.

My father held my hand as we all solemnly walked to church. White people gazed at us from their front porches. Some were curious I saw some of my little white playmates, but we did not wave or speak because that day was different. Somehow, we were different, and things would never be the same again.

A few police cars guarded our old historic church building as black people from all over town filed in. We were not afraid. The congregation sang, "We've Come This Far by Faith."

I was proud of my father that day for his willingness to sacrifice his children at the altar as a "down payment for freedom." As the years passed by, my world would be rocked time and time again by that horrible disease called racism.

I still carry the scars and bad memories of the many injustices that were to come in my life. The old song, "We've Come This Far by Faith," has taken on special meaning in my heart, and more importantly in my soul.

"In a racist society it is not
enough to be non-racist.
We must be anti-racist."
-Angela Davis

THE BLACK POWER SALUTE

COURTNEY BLAKES

**It blows my mind
that in 2020 we have to say,
"Black Lives Matter."
We allow any race to stand or
kneel with us.
Raise your fist in the air!
When black people raise a
clenched fist we do so for
unity.
If we raise an open hand, the
fingers are separate. When
we close them into a fist we
make a symbol of power and
unity.
This was never meant as a
rebuke of other races, instead
our salute is a call to unity for
people of color, unity within
black communities and unity
for anyone waging a struggle
for the people, for
empowerment, for equality
and for justice.**

#staywoke, #BLM, #Facts

SOLDIER OF THE SOLUTION

ANDRE RUDDOCK

Watching Minneapolis Police Officer Derek Chauvin casually crush the life out of George Floyd disturbed and infuriated me as it did all warmhearted human beings across this country. It stirred memories of October 1991 when I was 15. My father (Andre Ruddock, senior) was walking along 79th street on the east side of Chicago. Without realizing it, he'd strolled into an invisible drag net cast by CPD in a drug sweep called Operation Hammer Down. An undercover cop approached my father and asked him if he knew where he could buy some crack cocaine. According to witnesses, the cop didn't like the reply and thus attacked my father. Several undercover cops joined in the beating. Witnesses pleaded with the cops to stop as they informed the cops that my father had undergone 7 different medical operations and couldn't sustain such a beating. The cops drug him into an alley where they had a U-Haul waiting and tossed him inside along with others. Upon arrival at the police station, reports say the police lock-up keeper refused to put him in the bullpen, and instead, called paramedics. According to the Cook County medical examiner's office, my father died of blood clots caused by a blow to the head. The 10 to 12 cops involved reported they had no clue how or when my father sustained the blow that killed him. None of them were ever punished. Our family filed a civil rights law suit against the City, and they settled out of court.

With that as a backdrop, I'm sure you can understand the anger I felt as I watched that infamous video. My anger, however, eventually gave way to awe as I watched rage spread out of Minneapolis and clear across the country. My mind was blown and I was

filled with a level of love and hope that I've never experienced when I saw people of every age, race, religious creed, and nationality flood out of their homes during a deadly pandemic to take to the streets roaring "Black Lives Matter". The protest, for me, embodies the true potential of this Country which former president Obama illustrated in a speech years ago: "We are one people. We are one Nation. And together we will begin the next great chapter in the American story with three words that will ring from coast to coast: Yes we can!"
Or rather, Black Lives Matter!!
I have a regret which causes me to hang my head in shame. When I was free, I treated myself, my family, and my own community as if Black Lives didn't matter. There's not a day that goes by that I don't wish I could rewind time and do it all over again, but that's impossible. For me, personal responsibility is the first step toward balancing the scale, ending systemic racism, and creating the kind of country in which we all want to live. After more than 27 years of incarceration, I am about to regain my freedom in a matter of months, and the remainder of my life will be devoted to this new movement for criminal justice reform in all its manifestations.
I'll never again be counted as a part of the problem, but instead, a Soldier of the Solution!!

DISMANTLING "US VS THEM"

JESSE MARTINEZ

We're now familiar with the phrase 'social distancing' due to one pandemic. Another pandemic has given new meaning to the words Defund, Dismantle, Abolish, and Eradicate Systemic Racism after the brutal, sadistic murder of George Floyd. Where do we start with so many injustices?

To limit this essay to just one topic would be an injustice within itself, but Dismantling Us vs. Them is one small step in the right direction. Though it may make some uncomfortable, this focus can challenge our thoughts if we open our minds.

Whether one wears blues (prisoners) or beige (correction officers), we each have our own story. Each person is valuable and can be an asset in effecting change. If we're not part of the process of rehabilitation, if we're complacent, then we hinder that change.

How do we get to the point of having compassion for another person who may have made a bad decision in life that landed him/her in prison? How can we see that each deserves a chance at redeeming themselves, making amends, learning from their wrongs, and doing what's right?

We must first value each other and get to know the worth and humanity of each person. In doing so, we build bridges and destroy stereotypes.

It's vital for a person to have high self-esteem, confidence, and the courage to want to succeed. But if there's a "policy" that discourages interactions and encourages the demeaning and dehumanizing behavior displayed by "some," then it's counter-productive.

Corrections officers receive a lack of respect on a daily basis, and this affects their mental health.

Through ridding ourselves of stigmas and stereotypes, we communicate better and find real solutions together to better our conditions and assist us in the goal of rehabilitation. This starts by restoring individuals to useful citizenship instead of focusing on punishment.

It takes strength and intelligence to find real solutions. We must stop walking in the abyss of ignorance and educate ourselves so we can make a difference in this world and become better people, not just for ourselves but for our loved ones and communities.

Let's all strive for greatness and see greatness in each other.

"When the wound is deep,
the healing is heroic.
Suffering and ascendance require the same
work."

— Terrance Hayes

American Sonnets for My Past and Future Assassin

WAYNE

MELVIN PARKS

My name is Melvin Parks, Jr., and my story is about being judged because of my race – I am a black man.

Twenty-seven years ago, when I was twenty-three years old, I went to a party with some friends. I talked to a white girl named Lynn and we hit it off pretty good. We became boyfriend and girlfriend a short time later. During the time we were talking, Lynn told me she was from a small town, and that her family doesn't like black people and white people to date each other.

So, one day one of Lynn's friends told her mother and father she was dating a black guy. They were very upset with her and came over to Lynn's apartment.

I was there, and Lynn had me hide. While hiding, I heard her parents tell her it's okay to have a nigger as a friend as long as you don't date them and sleep with them. Lynn wanted me to meet them, but they didn't want to because I was black.

Fast forward this story – one day I decided to go to the restaurant that Lynn's father Wayne went to eat every morning before he went to work. I went inside and sat down next to him and ordered breakfast. While we were eating, I talked to him for a while. I asked him if he had any children, and he said yes, he had three children – a boy and two girls. So, we talked a while longer. I asked him about his youngest daughter, and he told me he was upset with her because of the guy she was dating.

He told me if the boyfriend she was dating was like me, everything would be alright. So I said to him, "Wayne, I am Melvin – the guy your daughter is dating." He got red in the face, and stormed out without paying for his meal.

When he got to work, he called Lynn and cussed her out and told her she set him up. But it wasn't Lynn who set him up, it was me.

Some time later, we had a child. While we were at the hospital, Wayne told me he was sorry for judging me because of my color without giving me a chance.

So, after that he invited me to every holiday, camping and boat ride with him. Now we're best friends, and we talk on the phone and he visits me and writes me letters on my birthday.

I guess this shows anybody can change with time; just give them a chance. Because me, myself, had to deal with my daughter dating a white guy. It made me think about my experience with Lynn's father, Wayne, and how I felt being judged because of the color of my skin.

WHITE PRIVILEGE

DYLAN METZEL

For most of my life I've been a minority in my environment, but there's a huge difference between being the minority in a small section of society and being a minority who faces the reality of racism. Being one of a handful of White families in a Black neighborhood is not the same. I wasn't routinely stopped and harassed by police. My home wasn't vandalized with racial slurs. No one tried to keep me out of their schools because of the color of my skin or my accent. No one tried to beat me up for showing interest in their daughter or sister. I was able to go outside of my neighborhood and I was just another White kid with all my inherent White privilege. When I first came to jail, I was routinely one of just a few White guys in population. That in itself is a sign of systemic racism. While passing through orientation, Whites were funneled to Menard where there were large numbers of Whites. Younger Whites who were seen as vulnerable by staff were held in Joliet for their own safety. The Whites who ended up at Statesville or Pontiac were encouraged by staff to check in Protective Custody.

One example of White Privilege jumps out at me. The night I committed my crime I was pulled over by the police. I was with some Latinos in a car that fit the description of a vehicle used in a shooting. Drawn to the side by officers, I was told, "Come on Kid, we know one of these guys shot someone. Just let us know which one it was. We'll protect you." "There's no way these guys shot anyone," I said, "They're just giving me a ride home from the park."

After searching the car they let us go. I was telling the truth about the boys with me because I had just shot someone. It was me. Had I not been White and had those officers not been seeing things through the prism of racism, I would have been arrested.

Presumed innocence is a selective reality in America as the tragic death of George Floyd so clearly proves.

I ask that everyone reading this try to see things from other people's perspective. Right now, millions of people are hurt and angry. Millions of people are afraid. They're afraid to leave their neighborhood, afraid to drive their cars, and afraid of the very police who are sworn to protect them.

My White skin may not have benefitted me very much while I've been incarcerated, but that was because I was a violent inmate who couldn't keep his hands to himself. That doesn't mean I don't still have a "White card." When I go home all I have to do is put on a nice dress shirt that covers my tattoos, grow out my hair, use my best "proper White guy voice" and I'm instantly back in the privileged class. In most situations I'll be treated with courtesy and respect. People won't fear me because of the color of my skin. I won't be targeted or discriminated against. Not unless they see me leaving the Temple and they realize I'm Jewish.

"I would not have you descend into your own dream. I would have you be a conscious citizen of this terrible and beautiful world."

-Ta-Nehisi Coates

EQUALITY

MICHAEL HARRELL

Race relations and racial disparities are clearly demonstrated within prison. American descendants of Africans comprise approximately 12% of the total population of the United States but 33% of the sentenced prison population, (Pew Research Group). This did not transpire by happenstance. During the entirety of our dwelling on this continent our people have been marginalized through chattel enslavement, pseudo-emancipatory liberties and codified rights that are not socially or legislatively recognized.

As a resident of a penal institution, I see mostly people of color castigated and mostly non-people-of-color as authority figures (Wardens, Majors, Lieutenants, etc...).

This draws a visual dichotomy that our subconscious recognizes as a clarifying example of who this country values.

People of color do not commit more crimes than their counterparts, but we are arrested and convicted in significantly greater proportions.

Our country was built on the blood, sweat, tears and backs of FREE Labor provided by people of color.

The United States emancipated its slaves in 1863, but in 2020 the remnants of our horrid past lingers.

Equality is not found in nature. Equality is a human social construct. If we are to be a just nation, better than our nature, equality must be our ultimate destination.

REFLECTIONS OF A BLACK MILLENNIAL

JAKE McCALESTER

My first experience with racism happened early in my life. It was the summer of '99, and I was 7 years old. One day the neighbor kids, who were White, were playing in their parents' car, and I tried to join them. They locked the doors and chanted, "Don't let the nigger in!" I'm not sure they knew what that meant because at the time I didn't. When I told my mom, she sat me down and gave me the "talk" about our history in the U.S. and how ignorant and cruel people can be.

5 years later, we had a similar talk about how to conduct myself with police when I'm inevitably stopped by them. I think I've always recognized racism in my life, but when I tried to confront it, I was always met with denial from White people with the cliché, "I'm not racist," or "I don't see color". It's become so accepted socially people don't even notice they're doing it. It can be hard for people to admit their mistakes or call out loved ones for theirs. Especially for something like race, but it's time we recognize this country was created for the advancement of Whites and the oppression of Blacks. In order for us to move forward, we must have discussions about racial disparity and work towards fixing it. It's no longer enough to not be racist. One must be actively anti-racist.

This is the moment to feel uncomfortable and confront this pandemic. We've all judged someone off of their skin. The worst thing we can do now is to not listen. There is such a thing as "White privilege." It's not saying you were born rich, or your life wasn't hard, or you never had to work for anything. White privilege means your life is not made worse because of your race. Use that privilege as a platform to fight injustices. The stats are there, systemic racism was literally built to function the way it does. It can only be fixed by leveling the playing field. Black people don't want handouts – only a fair shot. 50% of people under 30 are people of color, and we need to get with the times or be on the wrong side of history and be remembered by your grandchildren as "my racist grandparent."

The White activist/teacher Jane Collins asked an auditorium full of White people "Raise your hand if you would want to be treated like a Black person," When nobody budged she said, "So you know it's not right and you need to stop it!" Hopefully America will someday be great for all.

ONE INMATE'S IMPASSIONED LETTER REGARDING SYSTEMIC RACISM AND PRISON REFORM

ROGELIO "Y36409" RICHART

I will take this opportunity to share with you a story from my childhood.
It's a story of systemic racism, and yet also the story that radicalized me and planted the seeds of indignation in my heart.
I remember trick-or-treating in Little Village with my sister and finding ourselves in the the proximity of a shooting. We didn't stick around to see the outcome, but I do remember running home with a sense of fear that I'd never felt before. The next year my Mom began to take us trick-or-treating in the Garfield Ridge neighborhood and for the first time in my life I was introduced to another world.
I remember asking myself questions that I'd never thought of... "Why didn't my neighborhood look like this?" "Why weren't there any other families who looked like us around here?" I remember naively chalking it up as: separate but equal...enough, and moving on with life.
The next summer, when I was 11, I remember playing baseball with my friends at Piotrowski Park on 31st and Kostner. After practice there was a woman who was addressing a small group of parents and handing out flyers. She spoke passionately about how the factory on 34th and Pulaski was directly responsible for many of the health ailments born to those within the community, specifically asthma.
I don't quite remember the exact statistics, but I do remember hearing the terms "Environmental Racism" and "Second-class citizens" for the first time, and how a white community would never be subjected to such a thing.
The walk home was sobering, and I seemed to take notice of everything I'd been blind to before. I thought of Garfield Ridge, "Hmm, maybe we weren't so equal after all."
To me, those towers on Pulaski had been billowing smoke for as long as I could remember, and I even revered them with a sense of nostalgia. How happy I'd been to see those towers in the distance after a long trip downstate to visit my father in I.D.O.C. To me, they represented home.
After that day they stood there as if to mock me and remind me I was a "Second-class citizen".
I began to take notice of everything else around me that I felt was an indication of my social caste in society. The realities around me grew starker.
From my house on 28th and Komensky the towers were always visible, and I remember

waking up some mornings and running outside to see if that passionate woman had succeeded in her endeavor to get justice for all those oppressed. For the first time in my life I was beginning to perceive myself as oppressed.

Later that summer, as if an omen from God, I found my uncle's gang literature manifesto tucked under his bed. It spoke about the injustices bestowed upon us as Latino people and how it was an organization whose ultimate purpose was to change our circumstances for the better; to liberate our people! I know now that's a bunch of bullshit, but at the time it fanned the fire that's burned inside me since birth. Those men were not menaces after all, but in fact heroes!

I'd finally found a purpose greater than myself. An outlet in which to channel the passion that lay behind the curtain of my being. I would be a freedom fighter, a Latin King; just like the men in my family before me. I imagined myself single-handedly changing the general consensus and leading my newly enlightened brothers on peaceful protests; all for the betterment of our people. "What a hero!" All watching would say in admiration. I realized much later than I should have, that it was all just a fallacy, and so at 18 I made the decision to join the U.S Marine Corps. I still remember my Mother's face and how proud she was of my decision.

I walked into the recruitment office on 51st and Pulaski with so much optimism. "This is the beginning of the rest of my life," I told myself. I brought in my G.E.D and all other necessary documents. I took the test and signed off on a background check. A week later I was called back into the office and told I could not be enlisted due to my juvenile gun conviction.

I begged the recruitment officer to help me, "This is the only chance I have of turning my life around," I pleaded. He tried his best to enlist me, but eventually failed. I've never forgotten that recruitment officer, or the feeling of betrayal I felt towards a society I believed had failed me. "How could it be that even after giving me all the factors to fail, society would still continue to persecute me for a mistake I made as an adolescent?"

I embraced the gang lifestyle with an even deeper conviction.

Despite the stigma that will undoubtedly follow me because of my criminal convictions, I will never stop believing I am at my core a good person who was just too dumb to reshuffle the shitty hand I was dealt. I no longer hold society in contempt, I've grown past that. The part of me who looked upon society with contempt died with my ego in a jail cell on Thanksgiving Day, 2017.

We must never forget systemic racism takes many forms; this is but one story, mine. I'm sure every man behind these walls with me has his own story. For most of us, it begins with a subtle inkling that something just isn't right. Like Adam eating an apple from the Tree of Knowledge and not quite understanding why his nudity bothers him, but that it does.

At some point this evolves into the feeling of oppression and the understanding that America has covertly embraced a system that only offers Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness to some. That, although all men are created equal, we are still not treated as such. For them, the sky has no limits; for us, the limit is the sky.

Eventually, the cycle of bondage comes full circle and is manifested through our subconscious compliance to oblige by the algorithms society has put in place for us. But society can no longer hide the ugly truths that have continued to keep oppressed people down, and together we must fight toward eradicating the algorithms. I look back on my life with reproach but these experiences, collectively, made me the man I am today.

I feel obligated to share my story as I am a product of what systemic racism breeds, what it continues to perpetuate, and what issues I believe are imperative to resolve in order to fix our society; one of which is prison reform. There are other important issues, of course: police reform, increasing the accessibility to vote in minority communities, reinstating voting rights for felons, bridging the gap between income inequality, the private sectors influence on what issues become of mainstream concern and the allocation of resources that ultimately fix nothing.

How about reforming an overworked, overcrowded, and underfunded public education system that failed so many of us who could have been something more than just another statistic? Hey, maybe in an alternate universe I grew up to be President and changed the system myself, but in this one I am simply "#Y36409."

"I refuse
to accept the view that
mankind
is so tragically bound to the
starless midnight of racism and war that
the bright daybreak of peace and brotherhood
can never become a reality.
I believe that unarmed truth
and unconditonal love
will have the final word."
-Martin Luther King

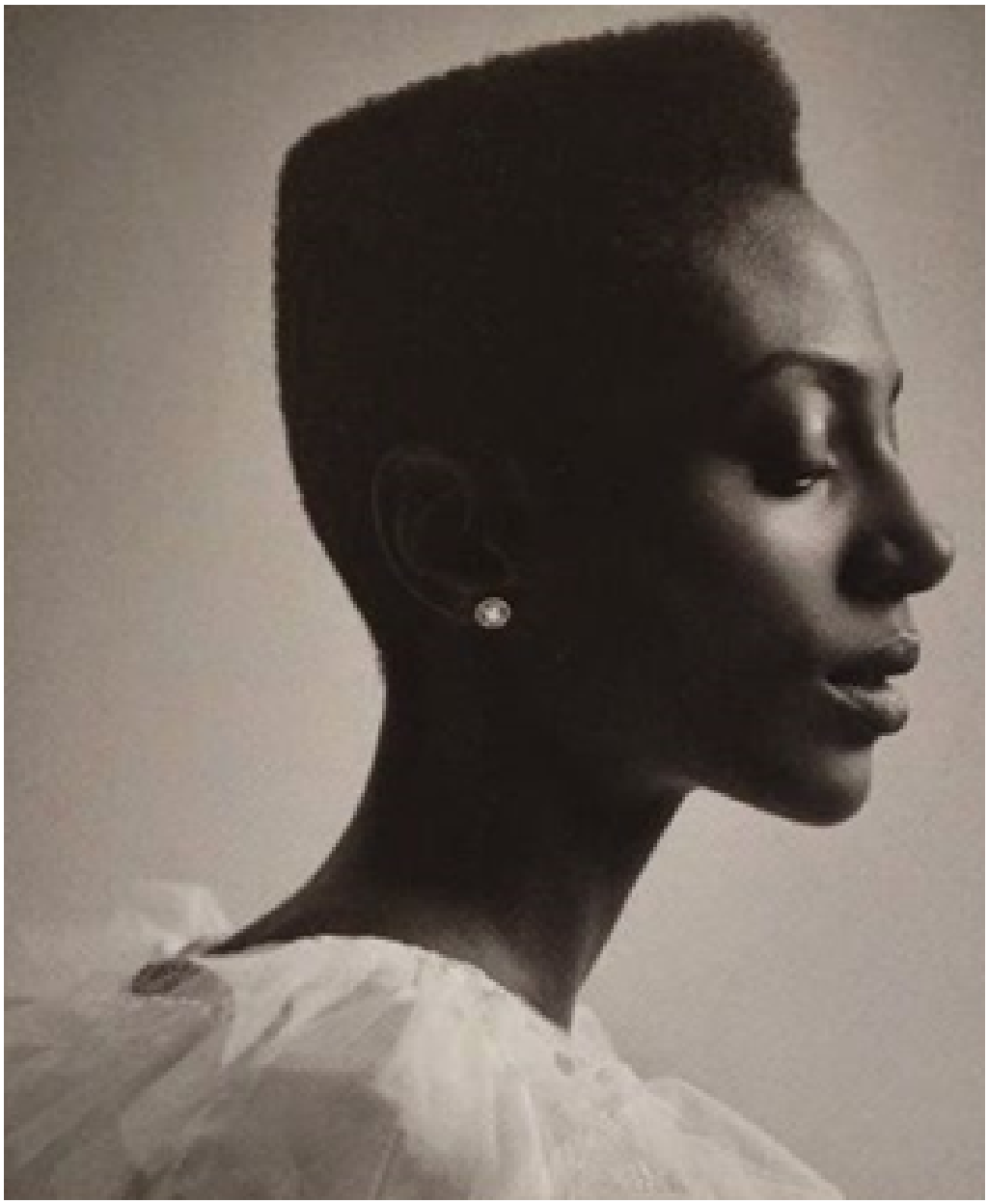
ONE SIDE

D'ARD JURIOUS

I've quit pointing the finger.
I no longer blame others for the consequences I've been given.
I no longer beat myself up over the things that haven't become what I expected.
I understand now that nothing in life will become what's expected if I don't transform into who I'm destined to become.
Everyone else's view of change is different from my own. Their mindset and objectives aren't mine.
Some people choose to hate, judge and hurt.
Racism will never end.
Death will never stop and righteousness will not always be the victor.
None is perfect, nor will we ever be.
But we must work together if we're ever going to have something better.
This starts by changing ourselves.
I don't hate the system though it hates me.
I don't hate racist people though they hate the color of my skin.
I don't hate my life for all I've been through.
I do hate ignorance and illiteracy.
I live to learn and be transformed.
Here I am, still standing on the right side of the road and hoping to change the views on the other side.
I'm ready to do all I can to help this world no matter what it takes.
My name is D'Ard Jurious. I am 35 years old. I am an incarcerated Black Man serving 6 years and 4 month more of my life. My Mother still battles her addiction to Crack Cocaine and I love her. I've never had a Father or a Father figure to teach me how to be a man. I have endured abuse. I am a Father and a Husband. I'm in Shawnee Correctional Center and all of this is only a small part of my journey.
My name is D'Ard Juurious and I want the world to know my story.

"You are a story.
Do not become a
word."

-Nayyiarah Weed



NATURAL LIFE

ED BELL

My name is Ed Bell #B-72493 and I am serving a Natural Life Sentence without the possibility of parole. My way of life that I was living made it likely for me to come to prison, however, being black played a part in why I am in prison for the rest of my life.
I grew up on the westside of Chicago and lived in a black Community. No white people lived on my block and no white kids went to my schools. I've never had a white friend in my life.
We was separated for a reason and I know that the reason was the way I felt the first time a white man called me a n-word and ever since then I feel white people look at me as a n-word. I was 22 years old when I got convicted for killing a black man like myself.
I have now been locked up for 26 years and black men in prison outnumber white men 3 to 1 and its more black men with a life sentence than white men. Illinois has no early release for those inmates doing long sentences.
"Why" is that? Is it because black men outnumber white men 3 to 1 and is it another way to say Black Lives Don't Matter?
P.S. I would love to have a white person as a friend.

BEAUTIFUL BRONZE SKIN

PATRICIA DUSKA

I was born to a Native American Mother and a Caucasian Father. My parents divorced when I was 2. My Father remarried a Caucasian woman who already had 4 of her own children. With my sister, brother and me we were so many. Ugh!

I loved playing outdoors all day in the Summer sun. At the end of the Summer days I remember being forced back into the tub after I'd already taken a bath! I was told, "Get back in that tub, scrub your neck and them knees!"

I scrubbed myself, over and over again. I didn't know I was different yet. It was the 70's and I was 5 or 6. When I got older I realized I wasn't dirty. It was just my beautiful bronze skin.

Racism played a part in my life growing up. My father's family was all white and treated me differently, though I thought then my Mother's Native American family did not treat me differently.

Today I notice the silent behavioral differences of Whites and Natives as they interact with me. It was on both sides of the fence. I see it. It's still alive today, alive and breeding in this prison, with staff and prisoners.

"Activism is my
rent for living on
the planet."
-Alice Walker

RACE

SCOTT RANFT

I am white, but know what it feels like to be hated because of the color of one's skin.
The term "white privilege" is a foreign experience to me. See, I grew up in a predominantly black neighborhood, and in my teens, I lived in a predominantly white neighborhood. I have been mistreated by blacks and whites.
My first experience of racism began my first day of school in third grade. The entire school was black, even the teachers. When my teacher left the classroom, I heard kids in the back of me saying "honkey," "white boy," "white trash," etc. I tried to ignore them, but then they started throwing things at me.
All of a sudden, someone punched me in the back of my head. It was shocking because, for the first time, I felt hatred toward me – not for my attitude, or anything I could change, but because of my whiteness.
After this experience, racism became a very real everyday thing. I'm white but lived in a black world. I got to see the world through a black perspective. And, being raised in a black culture, I took on some traits. I could not change the way I spoke, my taste in music, or how I dressed. So, when I moved to a predominantly white neighborhood, I experienced backlash for being "different."
I remember walking down the street near my house, and a kid yelled, "hey whigger!" I immediately became angry, and tried to stab him.
Throughout my time in the white neighborhood, I was treated as though I was black. The police stopped me for no reason and people called the cops on me for looking "suspicious."

My Solution
Racism is real, but my experiences tell me this problem goes beyond race. It's a cultural issue and a poverty issue. The Criminal Justice system – from police to courts and prisons – are rooted in exploiting race, cultural poverty, and the uneducated.
We must address not only race, but also cultural poverty and education. Otherwise the system will continue to exploit people.

IDENTITY CRISIS

K. TAYLOR

My story, sadly, is not unique, but I must share it. My maternal grandparents came to America to escape the poverty of Cobb, Ireland.

My mom, Priscilla, was only eight years old at the time. She told me she remembered seeing the famed Statue of Liberty for the first time and how she was filled with unbridled excitement.

She spoke of the expectation of limitless opportunities she was sure waited her. She recalled how my grandmother read to her those famous words found at the base of Lady Liberty, "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses..."

After landing at Ellis Island and enduring the rigamarole that accompanied arrival in the Land of the Free and the Home of the Brave, my mom wanted – more than anything – to attend American school. She, a freckle-faced, red-headed, cute Irish girl never expected to find or suffer racism here.

She had no idea my grandfather could not get work at the New York docks due to the influx of immigrants, the overwhelming demand, and the intolerance of "their kind."

Little did she know that she, her mom and dad were considered "Irish niggers".

Racism struck my mom at the age of sixteen, the first time she heard that term.

This inspired my mom to delve into education, and she went on to attain a Masters Degree in Education and became my seventh and eighth grade teacher in my elementary school, where she is now the Dean of Students. She made education a joy for me, even at home.

I remember my mom and I went to the toy store to get me a toy as a reward for my good grades. She was in the next aisle when I found the toy I wanted, and I was on my was back to her when I was suddenly grabbed by the arm by a large man who said, "I'm tired of you little niggers stealing from me!"

Surely this man was crazy and had the wrong kid.

My mom, just rounding the corner of the aisle, heard his words. She grabbed my other arm and told the man, "Unhand my child, now!"

He quickly released my arm and began looking as confused as I was. He asked, "Is this...he...he's YOUR child?"

My mom replied, "Yes, he is, you insensitive, ignorant creature!"

She turned us both on her heels, snatched my coveted toy from my hands and flung it to the floor at the manager's feet. She marched us out of that store so fast I could barely keep pace. I saw only rage on her face.

Once in the car, I sat in the back and asked, "Mommy, why can't I get my toy? What did I do?"

The tragedy that just unfolded, combined

with my naiveté, brought my mom to tears.
I was confused – didn't know what I did to make my mom cry – and joined her in tears.
"I'm sorry Mommy. I promise I'll be good!"
She said, "Climb up here, Sweetheart."
I climbed over the seat, and she lovingly took me onto her lap, then said, "Baby, you did NOTHING wrong. Mommy loves you so, so much. That mean man in the store and what he said was the problem."
I thought about what he said and asked my mom, "Mommy, what is a 'nigger'?"
She cringed and said, "Not you, Sweetheart," then hugged me again.
That term has been used to demean us for too long.
Racism remains today perpetuated for purpose for so long it's become systemic. It has crept from generation to generation and now places its threat on the well-being and livelihood of my children and grandchildren.
I'm sure the reader asks, "Why would that toy store manager call precious Priscilla's son, of all things, a 'nigger'?" The answer is a bit complicated, but yet, as simple as this; that toy store owner was a racist and my father is black. Sad what a little black blood can do, isn't it?

You free.
Nothing and nobody
is obliged to save you but
you.

Toni Morrison

400 YEARS

ARMAND ISAAC

400 years
of slavery, mass incarceration and police delivering beatings as instruments
of our government.
We take a peaceful knee in protest.
And remember.
How can we bring change when life in the U.S.A. only offers black men
guns, drugs and chains?
My attitude has become muted.
But I remember.
To protect and serve sounds absurd in Urban America, when on every level
there are those who took the oath but do Klan work.
400 years
of seeing your father never being able to provide or protect, and your
mother used as some fool's tool.
What can I believe in?
Not churches, liquor stores, guns, drugs or the police.
Everywhere I see them there's no peace.
So, until the powers that be deal justice and rights equally,
I will take a knee.

THE RAPPING AT THE DOOR

LEO CARDEZ

I want you to travel with me to a purgatory known as NRC. It is a massive concrete and iron human warehouse. Notice the despair and fear floating in the dead eyes of row after row of caged, young, primarily black men living in sub-human conditions. Join me as we attempt to navigate this shadow community.

I'm among them as a recently convicted felon unready to serve his sentence. As a middle-aged, middle-class, educated Hispanic American I don't know what is expected from me or of me- - I don't easily fit anywhere. I don't yet comprehend the gang-controlled hierarchy or convict code. I have neither social nor cultural connection to the majority of my fellow convicts beyond being of the same human race.

I've been behind my steel door for several days. I've paced my four feet of space in my gray, austere concrete box just like the thousands before me. I've fought against the mind games of predators looking for easy prey. Choked down three insipid meals a day slipped through a hole in my door like a zoo animal. Endured freezing five minute showers in rust-stained, mold-infested cages once a week. Anxiously talked to estranged loved ones for my allotted ten minutes a week.

They have so many questions. I have so few answers.

As night comes, I begin to realize I'm falling deeper into the well . My light's becoming dim. I ponder the easy way out. The coward's solution, I know, but everyone has a limit.

But then I hear my neighbors begin rapping a deep, lyrical rhythm.

They start every night after lights out. I think I must be going crazy from fear and stress.

Does anyone else hear them?

I think, how can anyone make music in this place? And why?

I lie in the void and wonder until my anxiety-ridden exhaustion overtakes me. Then the count lights flicker, the clickity-clack of the food cart returns and I open my eyes to the realization my nightmares are no match for my new reality.

Prison is a different world. I had to learn a new code for living and a new language. Everything intrigued me, especially the late

night rap sessions. It took me several days to decipher the lyrics and months (with my cellie's help) to understand their meaning.

These men were narrative sages of lives from a street culture I didn't know.

These rap sessions, are common on their streets where everyday aspiring rap artists make YouTube videos in the hope of attaining local celebrity. Rap is a part of the young gang subculture which carries over to their nightly concerts. These are their stories, pains and dreams.

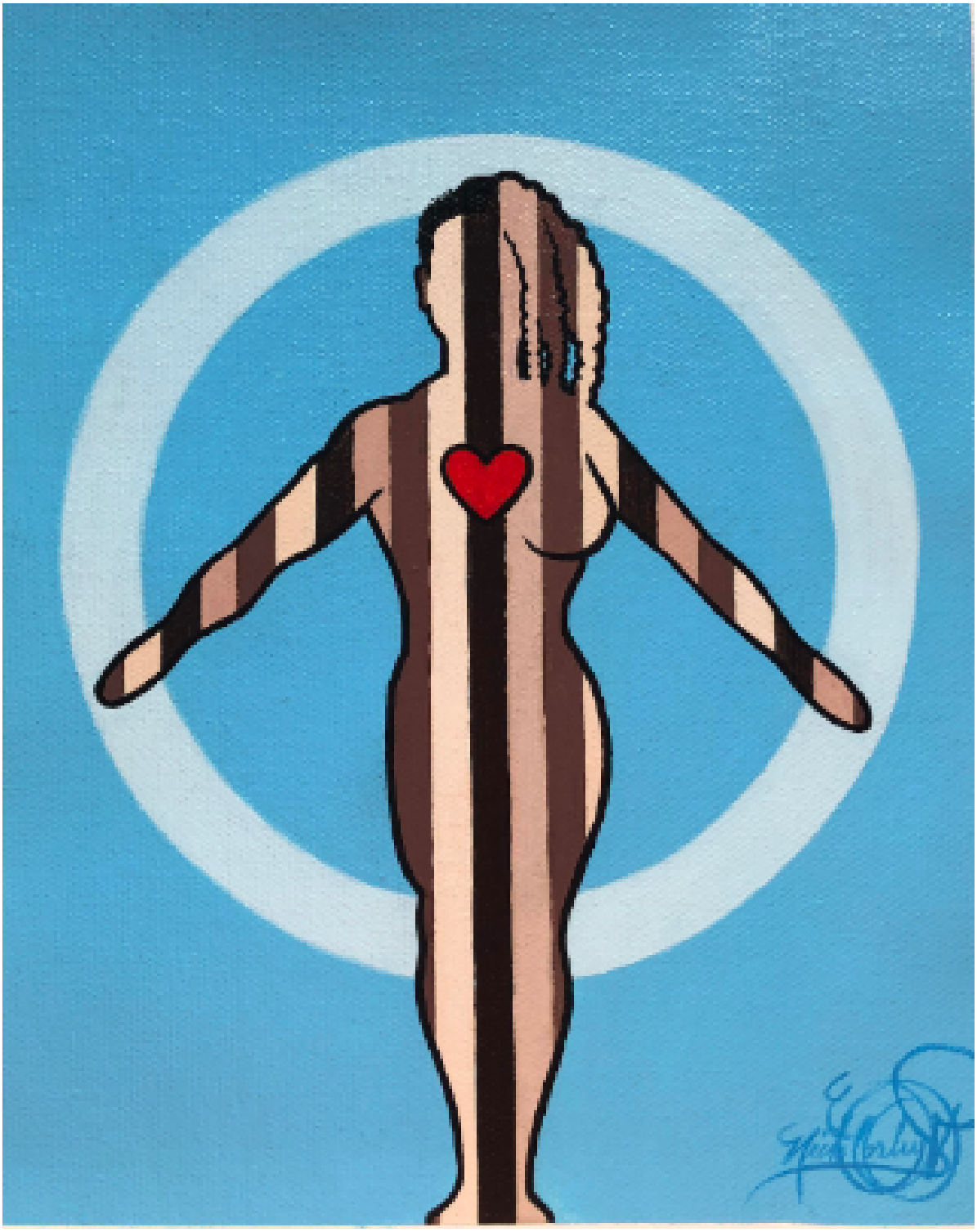
It is their version of current history and a reflection of their truths. It is how they carry and hold onto their culture. It was my first real awareness of how different cultures can co-exist closely and yet be world's apart.

We all grow up with music and rap is mainstream now, but do we ever think about its historical and cultural importance? Its ability to bridge gaps?

These prison walls have dark magic capable of taking so much from us, yet the raps live on, passed from one inmate to another, from one generation to another, carried with the care of memory.

These are more than just music. They are the soul, prayers and history of a marginalized people struggling to be heard.

I hear you. I hear you.



"Peace"

Artist-Nick Worley (Acrylic Paint)

Two Roads

Kewanee LSRC's Restorative Justice Program

V7 Race

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