

INTERVIEW OF LACINO HAMILTON BY THE OPENING STATEMENT

OS: What is the first thing you want people to know about living in prison?

LACINO: That prison is an emotional and psychological torture that is far worse than any torture to the body, by design. Days and weeks and months and years of being told up is down and right is left, punished for not acquiescing, for not showing extreme deference, influences the overwhelming majority of imprisoned men and women to give up or give in, and become mere shells of themselves.

I would want them to know that a relatively small guard force does not control a much larger prisoner population through brute force, alone. Prisoners are controlled through techniques of emotional and psychological weakening that is of no benefit to those imprisoned or society.

I'd want them to know that prisons are not country clubs, that there is no stake and eggs, that I haven't seen an egg, let alone eaten one in maybe ten years. I'd want them to know that there is no premium cable packages, no free rides to college, no sex in trailers. Prison is deprivation, despair, and depression.

OS: How did your experience with the criminal justice and prison systems change your political perspective?

LACINO: Prior to imprisonment both systems loomed in my mind as machinations of a larger racist system that harassed and brutalized those who were raised in poverty, but I possessed no ideas that could be thought of as a political perspective. I was aware that the police were not present in my neighborhood to serve and protect my friends and me. I was also aware that the courts separated and divided families, and prisons did the same, but never gave much thought to the social and/or historical appearance of those institutions; never gave much thought to who's interests is ultimately served by them; nor did I give much thought to what the larger power dynamics at play were. The criminal justice and prison systems were simply two of the many obstacles in my life.

Just recognizing those systems as racist or destructive, which I did at a very young age, didn't automatically lead to resistance. Which is what first comes to mind when I hear the term "political perspective." Experience absent critical analysis provides little in the way of understanding. There are working class and poor people with experiences to spare when it comes to the criminal justice and prison systems, which really should not be seen as exclusively distinct from one another, but at the same time lack awareness of what's actually taking place, and aren't consciously resisting.

It wasn't until I met George L. Jackson, Frantz Fanon, Paulo Freire, Attiba Shanna, and other radicals, through the pages of their books, articles, and continued social justice work that I began to understand my experiences as part of something much larger, as something bigger than myself.

I also had the good fortune of having the late Mayor of Jackson, MS, and premiere freedom fighter, Baba Chokwe Lumumba as a mentor and friend. It was through his tutelage that I began to see the world, my place in it, and responsibilities to others, different than what I saw them before. What I can tell you for certain is that there was no burning bush, no mountain top experience that transformed me. It was new information, that led to new understandings, that changed my life forever.

OS: Can you describe the prison industrial complex?

LACINO: The obvious description, it's a multi-billion dollar industry that encompasses the superstructure of the justice system (e.g., police, courts, parole division) in general, and the prison industry (e.g., prisons, work camps, prison vendors) in particular. The not so obvious is its an extension of a larger effort to marginalize, control, and exploit working class and poor people, prison's majority clientele. It's the result of a public school system that trains instead of educates, a continuously shrinking job market, class and raced based laws, the profit motive.

OS: How do you see corporate interests dictating the structure of incarceration?

LACINO: In order for corporations to escape organized labor in this country, higher wages and benefits, corporations comb the world in search of cheap labor pools and exploitable resources. When they are found, corporate migration

leaves U.S. communities in chaos. Huge numbers of people lose employment and prospects for future employment. With the economic base of these communities obliterated, education and other surviving social services are profoundly diluted.

Corporations promote legislation that eliminates restrictions that protect people, but increases protection for corporate interests. This process turns men and women into perfect candidates for prison. It is now possible to predict the probability of a percentage of the population spending some time in prison based upon corporate behavior.

When we limit criticisms of corporations only to the business they do by setting up factories in prisons and exploiting the labor of imprisoned men and women, we give up opportunities to better understand the increased reliance on incarceration to begin with. When we accept corporate influence and control of society as inevitable, we not only shrink from demanding a society that places people before profit, we also throw away strategies and tactics that can be used to end corporate rule.

OS: How has corruption affected your situation?

LACINO: Language such as fair or corrupt is meant to get across that state actors often act in ways contrary to their written or stated values, but such language also gives the impression that the criminal justice system is at times something other than corrupt, when it's nothing but corrupt. I have ditched such language from my vocabulary, at least when denouncing the race, class, and gender inequalities built into the criminal justice system.

I think the fact that U.S. economic, political, and cultural ideology justifies a system of winner and losers, with the latter far outweighing the former, is corrupt. I think state actors incarcerating people for not being a winner in that system, is corrupt. My incarceration for a murder I had no knowledge of, or participation in, was simply business as usual.

I can say this, the entire experience of essentially being kidnapped by the police, charged by the prosecutor's office based solely on the fabricated testimony of a jail house informant, that testified in multiple cases claiming to have received confessions, and sentenced 52 to 80 years, has influenced me to think more deeply about in whose interests does the criminal justice system really operate.

OS: Can you speak specifically about prison guards and administrators?

LACINO: Prison administrators and guards have, until recently, been spared the sort of aggressive investigation that imprisoned men and women routinely find themselves the subject of. The logical place to begin a critical look into prison is not with the poor, uneducated, disorganized men and women that are property of the state, but with the state and its representatives. "All other inquiry," the late George L. Jackson said, "would be like walking backwards: you will never see what is in front of you." We must begin with the director of the department on down to guards.

OS: Will you elaborate further?

LACINO: For most of history prison has meant prisoners, not the people who operate and staff these places. The collapse of the meaning of prison into prisoners has lead to a myriad of social and moral blind spots. Not only in the narrow conceptualization of what it means to be a prisoner, but in the severe lack of attention paid to how administrators and guards are a source of crime and punishment.

If anyone thinks the varied expressions of containing, and micromanaging the lives of prisoners down to when they can use the bathroom, when they can talk, and what they can talk about, what they can and cannot think about is not a crime, they should think a little more deeply about personal rights and economy of action. Think more deeply about what it means to be a human.

Critics of prison generally ignore the special talents required to control every aspect of another persons life. In the process smoothing the path for rampant neglect and abuse. Indeed, what administrators and guards do in the names of corrections is most vicious when it is invisible. When it is taken for granted.

OS: If what you say is true, how come so few people are aware of this?

LACINO: Well, most people only source of information about prison comes from the media. That being the case, if your only source of information about the people the U.S. imprisons is the movies, COPS, if it bleeds it leads local news stories, or other products of the media, chances are your information is distorted at best, but more likely so thin it should not be considered information at all. That is dangerous considering the U.S. is the most incarcerated crazed society in the industrialized world.

When the media does put a face on imprisonment it is not likely to be a human one. The most sensational stories about super predators, almost always urban, poor, black and brown, looking to victimize the reader or viewer, is the subject.

Furthermore, policy makers and social planners inverts reality so that the broader society learns to fear, resent, and blame imprisoned men and women for a rapidly declining quality of life. Not massive layoffs, financial speculation, government graft, or corporate wheeling and dealing that serves the interests of the rich and wealthiest Americans.

It is no wonder that we are thin on information about imprisoned people. The mass media is neither objective, balanced, independent, nor neutral. Those that own and program mass media are themselves part of the economic and political elites. Their interests in preserving the current economic and political relations require making prisoners invisible.

OS: What is the most severe prison abuse you have heard of at a prison you've been in?

LACINO: Michigan has approximately 42 prisons. I have been to over half in the twenty plus years I've been imprisoned. I have witnessed everything from decades spent in solitary confinement to highly questionable deaths. But I have to refer back to the last question, and that emotionally and psychologically the horrors of prison can never be told. Sequestering people, relegating them to an isolated existence, marked by an authoritarian regime. I think we have been conditioned to accept the presence of prison as an inevitable fact of life. So much so, most of us cannot imagine a world where people are not housed behind tons of concrete, razor wire, steel, bullet proof glass, motion detectors, and armed watch towers. We have accepted the violence of separating people from their families and communities as natural; and merely show frustration with the spectacular acts of physical violence.

Prison itself is a severe abuse. Depression and feelings of hopelessness are its hallmarks. A blinding and deafening violence that does not leave scars on the body, but lasting imprints on the mind and heart.

OS: What does prisoner justice and solidarity mean to you?

LACINO: In all honesty, I never actually thought about the words prisoner and justice together as a concept. However, a recent rash of publicized fatal shootings of unarmed black pedestrians by law enforcement has raised the cry for justice. But there is no coherent understanding of justice other than arrest, prosecution, imprisonment, and in some instances, civil suits. This is because the criminal justice system makes extensive use of state sanctioned punishment.

For me justice is based upon a deeply spiritual process of transformation. Transformation of persons, situations, and above all, future interactions. Justice responds to human needs holistically in order to restore the moral bond of community, and is based upon the principles of accountability, repentance, forgiveness, compassion, and reconciliation. The realization that when a harm has occurred, human relationships become fractured, and some times broken. And as long as human relationships are damaged as such, we can never be wholly or truly human. Meaning justice is not the state acting as if it has been harmed, but people entering into dialogue to reconcile, repair, and restore both victim and victimizer.

I suppose on further contemplation, I would say that "prisoner justice" is repairing the harm caused by prisoners. For each prisoner justice will play out differently.

As far as prisoner solidarity, it means moving together emotionally to respond to crisis and celebration. To commune in the everyday act of living. To be part of such a communing is to be fully alive, fully human. To be without community in this way is to be alive only in flesh. To be alone.

OS: Where should those who want to get involved begin?

LACINO: The only place that anyone can start is right where they are at.

OS: And where is that?

LACINO: History illustrates how tenacious and variable systems of oppression are and how dynamic and creative we must be to rise to the challenge they pose. As individuals and as groups our visions can only be partials. But working together brings multiple ways of analyzing the multiple dimensions of imprisonment, and imagining a world far less reliant on it. Diverse coalitions and networks offer the most promising strategies for the challenge.

The impetus for this more often comes from imprisoned people and their families. Their lived experiences often allow them to see more clearly the contradictions between myths and reality and lead them to develop a critical perspective on crime and punishment in America. But those not directly affected by imprisonment also have an important role to play in building a movement to challenge imprisonment patterns.

OS: Do you have any parting words of encouragement or advice?

LACINO: Encouragement or advice? I'll put it like this, the most serious problem we face today is not poverty, schools that are custodial in nature, structural unemployment, mass imprisonment, or any other social crisis of unprecedented proportions. The most serious problem is we are failing to make connections between awareness and action i.e., once aware of these and other crisis we appear to be incapable of making shifts actions to do anything about them.

Most people who are catching the worst of it don't have to be convinced of their oppression. Its so close to them its epidermal. However, they lack confidence in their individual agency to change it. Society's ideology keep people passive by making this world seem eternal, natural, as if what other way could it be? So I encourage people to act, even if its a small action, do something that builds toward substantially changing circumstances and conditions. Link up with others even if it's its only two or three of you. That's the way it has always been. Or in the words of the Africa griots, "small creeks make rivers."

OS: Thank you for your time and giving thought to these questions.

LACINO: Thank you for the opportunity.