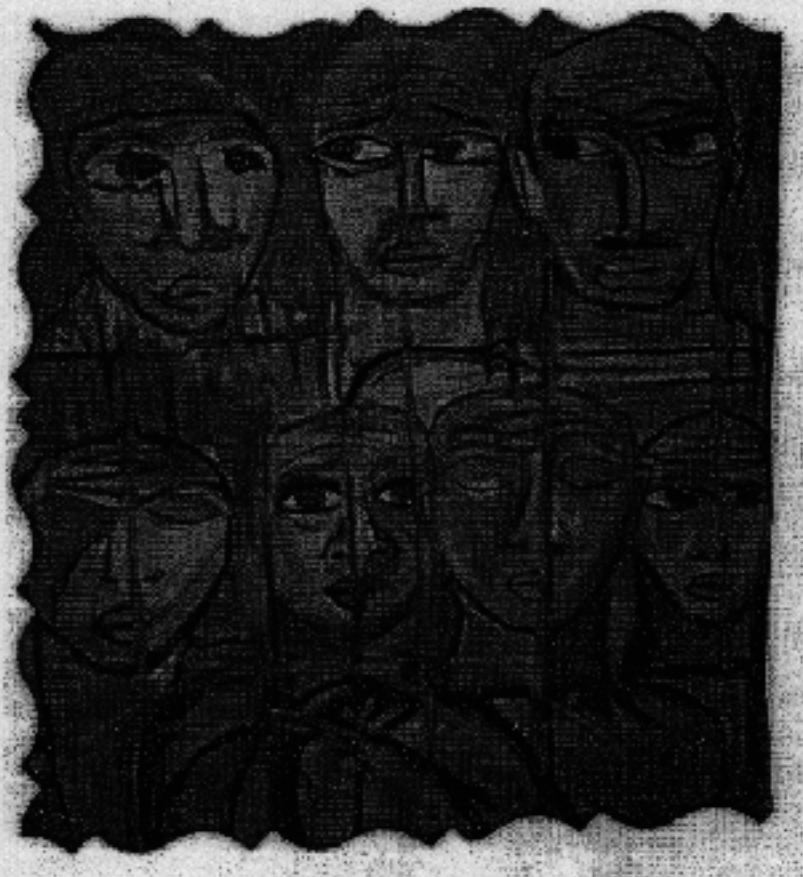


Youth Voices on Lockdown

An Anthology of Creative Writing



**By students at the Sprungs section of
Island Academy – Rikers Island**

**Edited with commentary by students in Columbia
University's course, "Youth Voices on Lockdown"**

Spring 2004

Introduction

Dear Readers,

During the spring semester of 2004, twelve students from Columbia University spent most of their Friday afternoons having conversations, sharing ideas, and experiencing art with 40 or so young men who attend Island Academy, the high school for incarcerated young men on Rikers Island jail. For some – both from Columbia and from Rikers – this was a life-changing experience; for others it was simply an opportunity to break the monotony (of jail or of academia) and get a rare glimpse into the thoughts and realities of others whose lives have been put on entirely different tracks. For most involved, it was an intense experience of learning and sharing that will not soon, if ever, be forgotten.

The Institute for Research in African American Studies at Columbia University has, from its inception, placed great emphasis on developing an activist Black studies program with a strong commitment to social justice. In keeping with this tradition, this year the Institute decided to support the Africana Criminal Justice Project's proposal to offer a unique course – Youth Voices on Lockdown – as a graduate-level seminar that would allow Columbia students the opportunity to lead weekly workshops at Island Academy on using the arts to explore a range of social justice and criminal justice-related issues.

The vision for the course arose out of the disturbing reality that the expanding prison and juvenile detention systems in the US have spawned a generation of young Americans whose lives have been profoundly altered by mass criminalization and incarceration of communities of color. In spite of growing outrage in communities, in the academy, and even within the media, few opportunities exist to hear, learn from, cultivate, and share the voices and perspectives of these young people. The Youth Voices on Lockdown course was designed to use the arts as a lens through which incarcerated young men can both learn from historical instances of cultural resistance and explore their own visions of social and criminal justice.

The Youth Voices workshops were entirely designed and facilitated by the Columbia students who developed the lesson plans and arts-based activities for each session. The Columbia students envisioned each workshop as an opportunity to share ideas about a particular social justice issue, to help cultivate passion for a particular art form, and to elicit some form of artistic production from each student – be it poetry, visual art, prose or rhymes.

The anthology that you are about to read has been designed to not only showcase this artistic production, but to include some of the reflections and commentaries of the Columbia students as well. We hope that this anthology will be used by activists, practitioners, academics, relatives of incarcerated loved ones, students, and teachers as a way to further and deepen our collective understanding – in the most real and human terms – of the growing prison crisis and its profound effect on young people in this country.

In Struggle,

Laurent Alfred, Adjunct Professor and Coordinator of the Africana Criminal Justice Project

Self

Educate YourSELF: Lessons for Youth by Youth

This chapter centers on the themes and writings of workshops conducted at Island Academy. It is a vessel of communication. Even when the topic of discussion was not specifically self-transformation, the subject of the workshops revolved around Us. The students' responses to the writing prompts define the prompts.

These students will not be in jail forever.

Jail is not a population or segment of society. Jail is a weapon that takes life. If two million people are in prison right now, then the state has just taken two million days of life. Two million days gone that we could have spent making us stronger. Five thousand four hundred seventy nine and a half years collectively taken in one day. These writings are not "jail writings". These are writings of students who are taking a blow that many people could not handle.

The reality is that all of our realities collectively make a world and every reality is as legitimate as the next. Instead of trying to understand "their reality", we all have to understand how all realities interrelate and affect each other in a historical process. Moreover, just as history shows the stages of development of a slave, society turned into a prison society; the present realities that we find behind the bars of this system show how in this society freedom will continue to rely on incarceration.

George Jackson wrote, "The ultimate expression of law is not order – its prison." The "order" that this society maintains is dependent on prison. This system cannot organize its institutions without violence. There is not one institution, public or private, in the United States that some agency does not violently police, patrol, or guard. Again, jail is a weapon.

Jail is not necessarily the worst pressure either. While the slave was the expression of an unjust slave society, the prisoner is not the only expression of injustice today. The slave would be a slave forever if he or she did not escape from the system. These students will not be in jail forever, but when they get out, they will still suffer from poor public education, poor healthcare, police brutality, and overall socioeconomic powerlessness. Our students were "apprehended" from an economic disadvantage that they will be returned to with even more disadvantages.

Jail is a weapon. Jail is a power that lets us know that we have none. The purpose of education is not to soften the blow, but to give us a weapon to fight back. Jail is proof that the only place we will find power is within ourselves.

Lesson inspired by the Black Panther's Ten Point Program on social, economic and political rights.



TEN POINT PLAN:

1. I want freedom so that I can finish school.
2. I want my freedom so that I can get my life together.
3. I want my freedom so that I can be with my family.
4. I want my freedom so that I can make a family.
5. I want my freedom so that I can be successful
6. I want the freedom to make mistakes.
7. I want a proper education.
8. I want to know my rights.
9. I want my life back.
10. I want freedom.

Rudy K

One day I look down the street
and All I saw were trees.
I look at the people, I
didn't know if it was my friends
or enemies. And when I looked
at the cars – I didn't know if they
was getting close or far.

I looked at the sidewalk as
I walked. It was different
than talking. I looked at the
windows as the wind blow. I
looked at the buildings and saw
graffiti – and knew in my head it was
not so neatly.

I saw the mailboxes and I thought
of people getting robbed.
At times it was getting hard.

I see my shadow and All I
thought was if it was a battle.

I seen the bird
and All I can
figure was how some
of them can say a word.

When I seen the plane
All I can feel is pain
because how far they was
away.

When I see the traffic
light – all I can see is
people that didn't have
patience to stop drinking
and then they'll have
a fight.

When I see a two way street
it was too much cars that
wanted beef.

When I hear the radio
it was like trying
to do something but you can't go.

Angel D.



LOVE is my mother and my family, my hood, and my everything that means something to me

HATE is the white man justice (ske-court-ske-judge) and where I am at now. Also HATE is seeing and having my mother cry every night and my bad habits that I have now and in the past. I HATE myself for putting myself in this predicament and crying myself to sleep every night.

A conversation with love...

Yo love, what's good you?
I'm chillin'...maintaining..
Yo Love, you love me so much..
Why don't you get me the fuck out of here?

What does LOVE mean to me?

To me love means having special feeling for somebody for example for my mother. My love for her means that I am honest, caring and understanding and love for my girl would be that I'm honest, faithful, caring and respectful.

What does HATE mean to me?

Fall of anger, frustration, pain, hurt..
Hate develops over the past or present situations...

By: *Shane E. Thompson*

REFLECTIONS ON THE SYSTEM:

The system is not fair,
because I personally think that the
system is built to enslave all
ghetto youths and to keep
pushing them down so they
can never rise to the top.

The system knows that to
keep poor people from
rising you have to slay us,
imprison us, and even
cheat us out of our rights.

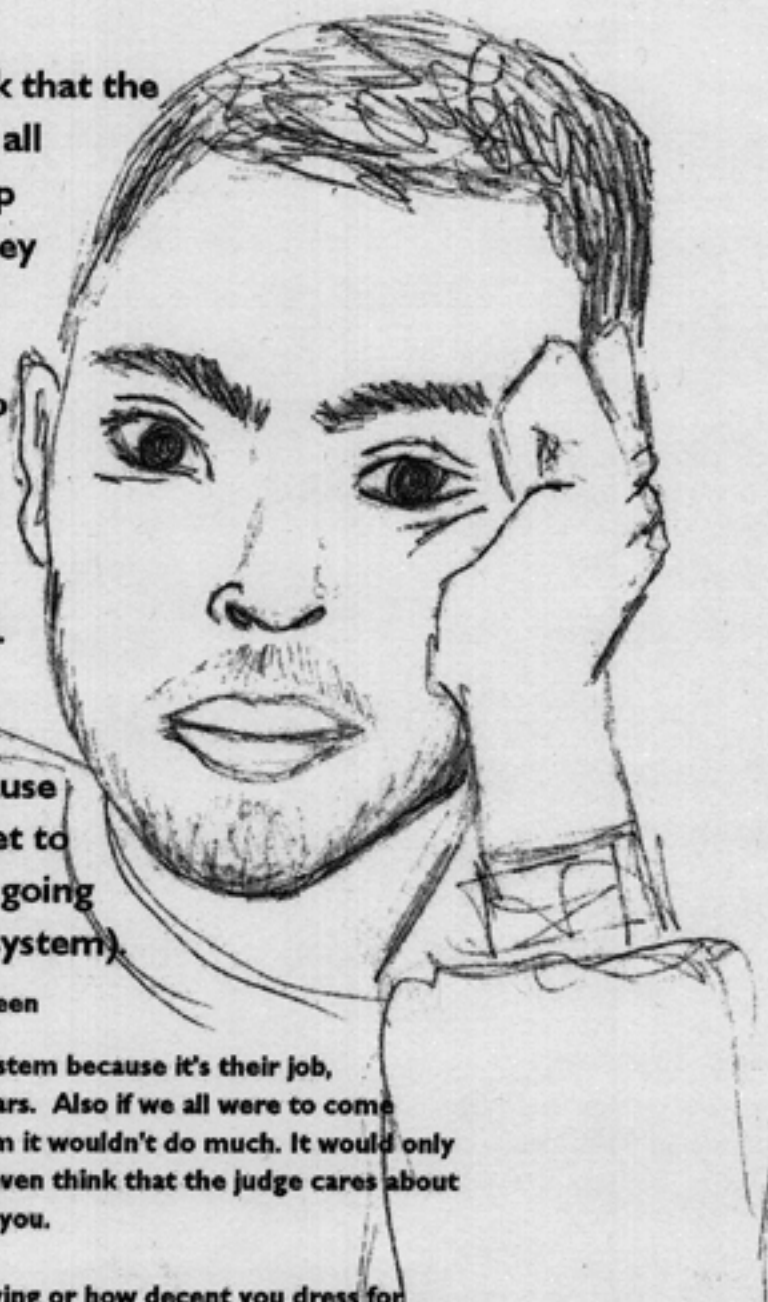
We need to get together
and fight the system because
if we don't, it's going to get to
a point where we are not going
to be able to stop it (the system).

- Rafique Green

I think that we can't change the system because it's their job,
people get paid to put us behind bars. Also if we all were to come
together and try to fight the system it wouldn't do much. It would only
change a little, not much. I don't even think that the judge cares about
you. Its his or her job to sentence you.

They don't care if your family is crying or how decent you dress for
court. If they don't like you or if the judge woke up in a bad mood, they
are the ones with the power. I think that our words don't mean
anything to the judge because if they did I wouldn't need a lawyer, I
would defend myself because I know what I did, and all I do is tell my
lawyer and he goes and tells the judge the same thing.
I really don't think we can change the system.

- Leon



Recidivism

After their time in jail, these young men will come back out in to the world. Far too often, they are severely under-equipped with the necessary skills to avoid re-committing the same crimes or knowing how to avoid situations like the ones that got them in jail in the first place. Recidivism, or going back to jail, is something that all ex-prisoners face when returning to their old environments. The temptations to fall back into old ways are everywhere, and young people need constant support to stay out of trouble. As these young men shared with us, there is truly nothing more constant than family and loved ones. During these transitional periods in their lives, any support system will fuel their actions. We can only stress that positive influences can affect them the most, and community members, family, and church can help give them the most consistent encouragement.

Future

Though many of the young men in Sprungs fear that a criminal record will keep them from their dreams of success, this is far from the end of these young men's' lives. They are going to be released from jail and are going to have to continue living their lives away from prison. Just like all young people, these men have high hopes for their futures that include earning a GED, going to college, working as a plumber, electrician, doctor, special education teacher, being a father, and any number of fulfilling ways to feel productive. Despite anything they have done in the past, their future is worth saving. As you read this section, please recognize the intense responsibility their families, neighborhoods, schools, and community centers have to grant them the support they need to rise above pain and hardship. Take this anthology as a reason to reach out to those who have been unlucky in the system, and deserve another chance to achieve their dreams.

Family

A few things to think about with regard to the following reflections of Family...

Racism in the United States

In this country, often the crimes one commits are not the only reason he or she finds themselves behind bars. As people are well aware, the problem of racism in our neighborhoods, media, government, and general society greatly affects the numbers and makeup of people who are incarcerated. For this reason, it seems as no coincidence that the students we worked with at Rikers are primarily from the same eight sections of New York City. These particular neighborhoods are populated by mostly lower-income people of color, who are also incredibly over policed. In a picture he drew, one student depicted the scene of twenty police officers, some with electric night sticks, who had grabbed him as he walked out of his housing project. No one can deny that one young man faced with twenty uniforms seems far from reasonable.

The problem of over-policing in communities of color has a huge impact on the prison population. One student commented that being at Rikers was just like being in the ghetto or the projects. He said that black and Latino people live in the ghetto and the projects, and when he wakes up all he sees around him are black and brown people. Of the many factors that contribute to someone's arrest, it is incredibly important to consider how greatly race discrimination in our society affects who we see in our jails.

The Offenses

All across America prisons and jails are filled with nonviolent offenders. Many of the young men we talked with at Sprungs are nonviolent offenders whose crimes can be considered crimes of poverty. This means crimes that were committed because they needed money to survive, and got it through things like selling and distributing drugs. While looking at the large number of non-violent young people locked behind bars, we have to ask why it is acceptable to look towards the prison system to correct a social problem. The students expressed constantly that being in a negative, claustrophobic and anger-filled environment did not help them in any capacity. Many felt that instead of being locked in a cage-like community of frustration and abuse, they could be in a school, anger management counseling, job training, drug rehab, or any number of productive ways to spend their young years. It seems to us that our society is missing the main points of what we need to correct the problem of so many young people in jail: building up the education system, creating more jobs and job training in low-income neighborhoods, and replenishing impoverished populations of people across the nation. Nobody chooses to be poor, and they should not have to pay for the consequences of a faulty social and economic system.

...About mothers...

The most important woman to me is my mother. She is the only one that raised me and did birth. Any other lady I respect them but not like my mom. With out my mom I'd never be here right now in this workshop. That's the most important woman to me.

- Pedro Lopez

The wrinkles on ya face is because you old,
You tucked me in when I was a baby when the night was cold,
Mother of my moms with a loving heart,
I'll love you till death do us apart...

- X

My Mother

My Mother's name is Deitra Thompson. She is 42 years old she is suppose to come and visit me today and I'm still waiting for her to come. She lives in Brooklyn I live in Queens. When I was home I really never saw her much but now she is supposed to be changing she said she is going to come see me, and I told her I'll believe it when I see it, so if she doesn't come I won't really be mad but it would be kind of tight.

- Shamel Thompson

My mother Carmen is a very strong an Independent person. While she raised me alone I've learned how to take care of stuff I need to do around the house for when I get my own apartment. Even though sometimes she has a temper I've learned to not feel offended by it. She just wants me to do what's right and not make the same mistakes she has made in life. Carmen has taught me how to treat people and how to get around by myself.

- Charles Valent

My mom is like a teacher,
She teaches me about life.
My mom is like my best buddy,
I talk to her about everything.
My mom is like my dad teacher
My mom is my love and she is my number 1 in my life.

- Emmanuel Estrella

My mom is important to me because that's the only thing in this world that I have. She took care of me since I was young kid. She took care of four of us. It is hard to be a single parent, so that's why I consider my moms to the best person to me. She would always be there for me and my brothers.

- Domingo Rodriguez a.k.a. Kiki

A very important woman in my life is my mother because she's there for me no matter what.

- unknown

When I was born, my mom was only 20
 I was born April 27, I was a spring bunny
 She was there through thick and thin, for blood is thicker than water
 And now that I'm in jail, I regret every bad thing I said and every time I fought her
 She was there like the Sun on the sea,
 Sticking like honey to a bee,
 The only true moment in my life to me
 A dedication I wish to commit to my mother for the things she did
 I'm sorry momma, now I must do my bid.
 - Chris Cooper

The one person in my life that I have ever lasting love for is my mom.
 She is like a queen that always has to get it her way.
 She always has love for me and my other brothers and sisters,
 Even when we get ourselves into some shit
 Like she says, "Don't get yourself into shit that you can't handle."
 My mom is a strong person
 She plays a father role in my life too
 She don't hold back her mouth for anyone,
 But that's just my mom.
 - Marlon Barrow

I love my mother so much she is like my best friend. Love for my mother is so strong. But I miss her so much. Now I am in jail she still come and see me when I was home I didn't know how much I miss her. My three little sister is the love of my life too.

Mother is my heart my sister is my breath like life from the Lord almightily God. My sister is like life to me and the best thing that happens in life is fun. But with my family there is nothing better than being home. Being home is the best thing in my life and I love all my ladies is the love of my life without them. I don't want to live without them I can't think without them I can't go on life in general.

- Smith

Question posed to student: What would you say to your mother?

- I feel bad for never listen to her
- I will see you one of these days
- Don't worry about me
- I want to go back to school and get a job and go on with the rest of my life
- I don't want to come back here

To Mom

It's ok being here
 I feel kinda scared being here
 That's how we learn not to come here
 I can tell it hurts her, but she don't want to tell me
 Sometime when she sees me she's crying

I got 4 sisters and one brother

She don't look like me

She's a nice mom

A good lady

She's short, a little fat

She's a little bit light

Brown like my color skin

She wears red blue

Her favorite color is red

- Both above selections by *Jose*

Falling Down

I cant ever stand without a helping hand.
The shadows seem deep, I cant ever sleep,
 My body feels weak.
I walk and sneak on to the mountain peaks,
 So high smoking weed
Makes my mouth too dry [for this man] to cry
Falling down

--Daniel Monteverde

The hands of time change
As the human race as we know it
 Remains the same.
Thoughts pass through one ear
 And out the other.
Which leaves the question,
Am I the keeper of my brother?
Or would my brother be the keeper of me?
Will you do something about your freedom.
 Or let it be?

--Israel Cofield

Who am I?
Does it matter who I am?
Does it matter if I am Black or white?
We are all humans we have a heart and a Brain.
SO why are we treated differently?
Is it the color of my skin?
Is it the texture of my hair?
Is it because of where I'm from?

--Brian Mayo

Mario Chambers
3/12/04

From my point of view I think these handouts stand for black people who believed in Civil Rights and equal rights and would not stop fighting for what they knew was right.

Today's street gang's are supposed to be fighting for pretty much the same thing. What I mean is that my group the "Bloods" originated from the Black Panther's so I pretty much understand what Black people are fighting for.

--on movements for Liberation and Civil Rights.

Jaron Santos

I think that before we as a people are to take a stand for change we have to get the people involved.

And one way to do so would be to hold rallies to get the message across.
Therefore the people would be aware of the movement and reminded of all the wrong things and unjust laws directed towards us.

--on African youth liberation movements..

Assignment prompt: What would you do or what would need to be done to build your own liberation movement?

On Society...

On Jail...

How much different is this from slavery.

When we get chained and pushed around, this is bullshit!!

You got to be gaming me.

When I'm pushed inside a cell and expected to act civilized.

Being tortured, locked in all days. Is that the best way

You thought will help me realize.

I think that you're the ones that need to see, that everybody

Your doing this to is everyone who looks like me.

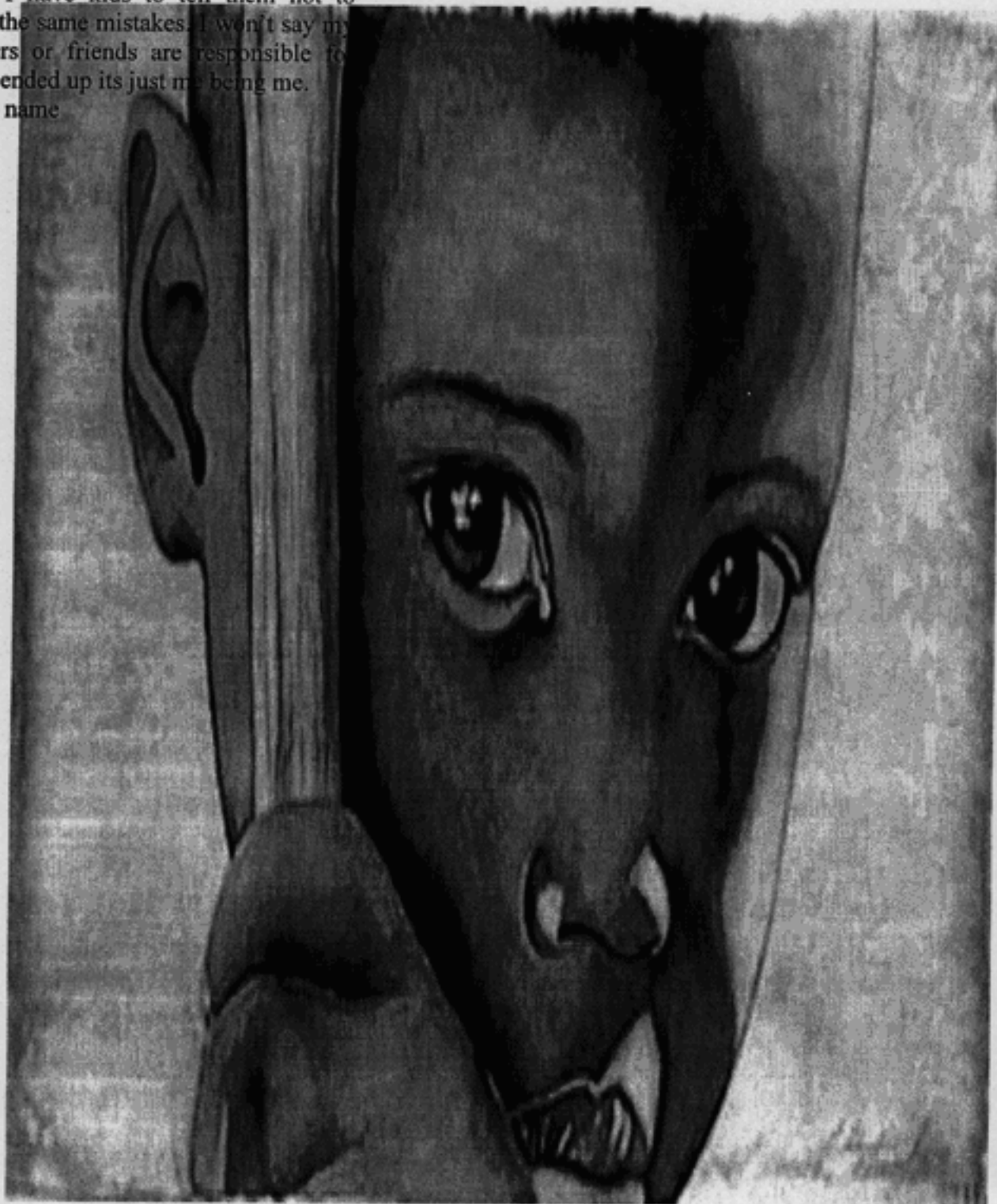
And you look at the color of my skin and you tell me

This is not slavery.

--Tawan Evans

If my father was ever there for me I think I might have had a better chance of staying away from jail and I might have been different all together. I think I could have had less love for the streetz and spent more like looking up to my pops. From my experience I learned when I have kids to tell them not to make the same mistakes. I won't say my brothers or friends are responsible for how I ended up its just me being me.

- no name



To my three daughters,

Well I'm writing this letter while I'm
lock up let me start by telling you that I
was lock up plenty of times before I
wrote this letter but it wasn't serious.
But about mens please don't get involve
with them there a real problem.

Why – because all they do is fuck
different girl all day and you might not
know what those men have they might
have HIV or AIDS and you don't want
that. Another thing you don't want to
end up in the streets because a lot of bad
things could happen while you by
yourself people get involve in drugs and
prostitution I don't want that for u, I
want the best.

Another thing is don't use drugs...it's
not good to be a druggie listen to your
mom and don't give her a hard problem
she don't need all that stress she already
have ya 3 to deal with.

Daniel Vargas