

Pinta Fearz: A Chicano Sociologist's Life on the Edge of the Law



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I run to get in my ranfla (car, usually low rider). Sinking low I stomp on the gas pedal. My mother had called to tell me the police were looking for me today. I knew that when I got into that drama, that I was going to end up doing some tiempo. But shit, I ain't ready to go to the pinta and I won't let them take me. No way. No how. I'm not going to waste years of my life sitting behind bars. I won't let them take me. I am hurting inside because I know that as hard as run I won't be able to get away. Where will I go? The jura's EyeZ are on me and in esta vida there ain't no gold at the other side of the rainbow. Suddenly, my tires pop and someone reaches from behind and forces me to the ground. Lying face first in the dirt the handcuffs are tightened as I feel a gun pressed against the back of my head. I listen to the officer's happiness, "We got you, you mutha fuckin spic. We run these streets. Not you." I know my fate has come. I struggle to open my EyeZ.

Wake up! Wake up! Please wake up I tell myself. A deep tingle goes through my bones and reaches to rip out my heart and soul. I grab for the rosary around my neck as I begin to gain consciousness. I sit up quickly and look over at my hina sleeping on the left of

me. I feel a sense of relief but not yet assurance. I get up and walk into the next room. I look into the dark. It feels like Demons are all around me. I can't see anything but I know my kids are in there sleeping peacefully on their beds. I push past the darkness and walk over kissing each of my children on the forehead. I thank the ONE above that I am still here.

I look at the clock and realize it's time to begin my day. I pack my backpack: two books, a folder, and my cuete. It's time to go to school at the local off-campus community college. I don't have enough formal knowledge yet to enter their on-campus world. After class, I walk out of the sociology course realizing that someone is ready to make me a statistic. The majority of young vatos in my neighborhood are going to prison, working dead end jobs, or getting killed. What can I do to end the story of my life In the Midst of My Confusion?

The next weekend I talk to my hermano who just got out of the pen. I tell him of my dream. He, too, tells me that he dreams of prison. He describes a situation in which he is sitting in a holding cell realizing that he has just been given 20 years and he does not feel worried. He knows that he has done time before and he can do it again. The penal system cannot break his soul no matter how many years they give him. Instead he feels bad for his family. He knows they will suffer the pain completely. He knows how to do time: cut off everything close to you and become hard. Don't let anyone talk bad about you. Show respect. Be your own individual. Don't become over-committed to all the racial bullshit because people will feel like you owe them favors. Have a close crew around you to exercise and help watch your back. Find ways to fill your time: school, exercise, reading, and a whole lot of thinking he tells me. I look up to him as a warrior who has mastered some internal control of himself that I have no clue of understanding within my own vida. I'm a lost soul who is trying to make something better for me, my family, and my raza through school.

The next weekend arrives and I encourage my hermano to come to the club. There are a lot a firme hinas out and you can't miss out. Damn, the club is a beautiful place. Lovely ladies all around us and drinks that help take us to another level. We leave the club happy walking along a dark alley. A young vato is sitting on the curb. I pay no attention to him as I walk by. The vato says, "Fuck Red." My younger brother replies "Fuck you too" and all of a sudden a moment of tension fills the air. The young vato lets a whistle go out. Seven more bald headed vatos run up to see what's going on. I tell them that we don't want no problems and that we don't bang. I remember struggling to quit bangin' several years ago. They are heated and I realize deep down that we won't be able to walk out of this one. I try and keep the peace as we begin walking to my ride. All of a sudden I am hit in the face as the drama begins. We are all fighting. These putos are weak. My brother who was in the pinta bends down and tightens up his shoelaces. He starts using his fists like a weapon just waiting for the opportunity to flow. The vatos become frustrated. I am pushed to the ground and begin rising up when I am clocked in the nose. The back of my head is pushed deep into the concrete. Everything goes black as I struggle to get up. What the hell is going on? My hermano comes over to help as I begin to walk to the car. One of them pulls a knife and slashes my brother in the throat as I reach for my cuete. I begin to

let the fire burn. BOOM. BOOM. BOOM. BOOM. Bodies start scattering and dropping as I unload valas (bullets) into these putos (assholes).

A quiet and dark moment passes as I am sitting alone. I look into the dark sky searching for a sign. I know what is coming and I can't stop it. These fools fucked with my family and I got caught up. There is no turning back from my decision. I remember Emiliano Zapata when he said that "I'd rather die on my feet than live my life on my knees." I feel a deep freeze come over me. All I wanted to do was help my people. All I wanted to do was go to school, raise my family, and change all of this madness but here I am about to fall like so many others. My time has come but no one in my family will drop on my watch.

The clouds in the sky shift as I remember telling my hermano about a research project I had completed. I told him that I found a list of all the people who were in prison in an 1880 Colorado penitentiary. The prison list had both of our first and last names, and I wonder if we had lived this life before. I sat knowing, the penitentiary has always been calling me. I reached for my rosary to pray to the ONE above that no one placed a member of my family in danger. Please God give us one more chance. All the while recognizing that this ain't a dream.

The story that I have told is true and has been lived by me along with many inner-city Chicanos in this country. However, the crucial decision to shoot did not occur. I pushed my gun under the seat of my car as I drove to pick up my brother who was now being chased. When my hermano hopped in my car I was furious to see that he was bleeding all over. He held onto his neck as I drove several city blocks to a hospital. My anger raged without an outlet. The hospital ambulance rushed him to a throat specialist. I walked in circles planning the payback. The police arrived at the hospital but somehow did not seem to think this case was worthy of their attention. Thus, I have constantly questioned the decision not to shoot. Should I have taken the law into my own hands? My brother, who had only been out of prison for two months and had just been stabbed, told me it would not have been worth it. Since his mistake in life he has been touched by death twice and he tells me that I am destined for more. I tell him that nothing comes before family and I would try to claim self-defense. He looks at me seriously and tells me that I would do time but I know he would have done the same for me.

For a long time dreams and visions held a strong presence in our indigenous culture. However, looking at these patterns sociologically I can't help but become frustrated. Nevertheless, the drama in the barrio has been escalated by a governmental practice that increases the chances for Latinos and African Americans to enter the penitentiary. When prison incarceration began to increase in the 1960s Whites were the majority of the prison population, but this pattern did not last for long. White flight to the suburbs provided the space for racially and ethnically segregated neighborhoods that would simplify the process for racial differences in crime, education, employment, police oversight, and poverty.

Since the 1980s our federal government has declared a war on drugs and in many states a war on gangs as well, and the prison rates have boomed. While drug use has been found to reflect percentages similar to the entire population, drug dealing is often thought to be a lower-class minority phenomenon. In the inner-city the lack of jobs and legitimate opportunities offered through education may have increased the pressure to make money through illegitimate means, but the arrest and sentencing figures are highly skewed. The U.S. Sentencing Commission has found that Latinos and African Americans comprise 81 percent of those convicted for powder cocaine offences and 93 percent of those convicted for crack offenses. These numbers highlight that Latinos and African Americans are primarily labeled guilty of such behavior, and differential levels of policing in our racially and ethnically segregated cities continue to support this assumption. The United States government's executive and legislative branches target those with the least amount of social power in this country.

Perceived gang membership has been another way people of color are controlled with 78 percent of all gang members being Latino or African American. All that is needed to comprise a gang would be three or more people engaged in criminal activity either collectively or individually. Nevertheless, this definition would suggest that either White people do not have three or more friends or they never break the law. Cities across the country have instituted Gang Units to deal with the perceived threat of gangs both substantiated and unsubstantiated but largely pushed by moral panic fears. Gang units receive local and federal funding to gather intelligence on people without any criminal predicate. While individual gang criminals need to be held accountable, the blanketing of entire Latino and African American inner-city communities as "gang infested" does not deal with the problem but rather increases the negative treatment by police. Gang legislation continues to hinder civil rights while gang prosecutors perceive gang members as fundamentally different people.

According to the most recent Bureau of Justice Bulletin at midyear 2003 the nation's prisons and jails held a little over two million people and six out of 10 were African American and Latino. Latinos and African Americans do not yet comprise three out of 10 residents in this country. Thus, we continue to be represented in the prison system at a rate of two to three times our population. The incarceration rate and number of Latinos and African Americans doing prison time has greatly increased since the 1980s. These numbers look more disturbing when we recognize that people of color are being removed from their communities at an early age. The Office of Juvenile Delinquency Prevention found that seven out of 10 youth in secure confinement are minority juveniles.

The families of people incarcerated continue to suffer while they witness and experience the loss of their husbands, brothers, fathers, and sons. A saddening fact is that women of color, our mothers and sisters are currently being incarcerated at escalating rates as well. While men are currently 15 times more likely to be incarcerated than women, women's incarceration rates are increasing rapidly. Moreover, our families are separated and the dual earning couple eliminated. Thus, the entire family does time along with the person convicted. The children grow up incomplete and the cycle of oppression receives gasoline to fuel the fire of our destruction. The ability to visit our loved ones becomes

complicated by the isolation of prisons into rural islands, the strict requirements, and grueling dehumanization that will take place. Inmates will be strip searched and visitors can expect to be perceived as criminals.

The latent function of the prison indoctrination process could be called a war on people of color and it continues to disenfranchise us from jobs, housing, voting, and respectability. The majority of people who are sent to prison will one day be released despite the average prison time increasing since 1980. The average time served for a first release was 25 months in 1995 compared to 20 months 10 years prior. These ex-cons will face enhanced difficulties when they leave prison. Life with a felony record will guarantee the dismissal of applications for legitimate jobs, and make finding housing a serious obstacle. Devah Pager's recent work argues that a criminal record poses a major barrier towards getting a job for African Americans. The majority of individuals faced obstacles before they entered prison and they can expect many more after being released. Police will also continue to treat people with felonies as criminals but neglect to investigate individuals who violate their rights.

Inner-city neighborhoods across the United States provide the space for people of color to fight one another. We fight and are murdered by people encountering similar life obstacles. The racial and class characteristics of homicide victims continue to mirror the perpetrators. It is easier to support the belief in not being against our people through talk, but when we are placed in violent confrontations the ability to follow this inaction can often lead to our lying on a gurney with a tag on our toe. Community activists and outsider observers continue to dictate how we should behave when confronted with opposition, but peace has never worked when dealing with people who feel they have nothing to lose.

Latinos and African Americans will never achieve equality as long as we are held in racially segregated neighborhoods, schools, jobs, and prisons. In the post-civil rights era the executive and legislative branches have declared war on people of color and maintained the façade that they will be against criminals and drugs. The United States will continue to produce criminals as long as they deny all racial and ethnic groups equality of results. In the barrio we are socialized to learn resistance through our struggle to gain consciousness and self-determination. Until we achieve our rights as a people, the road ahead will be bullet-ridden and door grinding with many additional oppressive tools designed for brown and black control. But resistance will continue.

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