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### **The Gangsta, The Prisoner, and The Immigrant**

On the first day of this course: Survey of Critical Thought, I was not too sure what the course was about. We were instructed to do readings and then talk about the readings..that's it. It seemed easy enough until I saw how much reading it was! There was several readings that were so dense it was hard to stay awake after the first 50 pages! Then there was several readings that really spoke to me on a very personal level. One of these writings was "Reflections on Exile," by Edward Said. Each passage took me down avenues of memory that are filled with experiences of me as an outsider looking in. Always the outsider. As I read the Said essay it was as if this man was explaining my life to me. So many passages make so much sense. To me, it authenticized so many points in my life which I believe to be absolute truths. I believe that artists are investigators of truth. The same way a scientist experiments with physical things to reach theories and laws of physics, artists look for truths of our humanity. In this paper I will be trying to point out things of my own humanity, and use Edward Said's, "Reflections on Exile," to help me reach these truths.

I am a forty-one year old undergraduate, art major at UCLA. My life in higher learning began late into my thirties. When I was 36 years old I paroled from a California prison after serving a sentence of 14 years. It was while incarcerated that I realized I was an artist. Spending

countless hours locked in a box forces an individual to make use of the time and not go crazy, which some prisoners end up doing. I believe that if you are able to deal with the stresses of the confinement in a positive way, an individual could walk away from all those years with a positive attitude and maybe even knowledge and wisdom gained from the experience. About 4 years into my sentence I began to look for ways that would take me out of the prison space on a mental level. I noticed that a lot of inmates would exercise on the yard so I began doing that, and it does help. But what really took me out of the prison space was drawing. It was art that made the prison walls disappear, even if only for the hours I would work. It was this habit of simple pencil drawing that led to art books, and then a passion for art in general. This passion led to other forms of knowledge such as philosophy, and eventually college correspondence courses. I realized my way out of not only the prison I was physically in, but also the mental prison I had placed myself in before prison, could only be overcome if I started inward, deep in my soul. My entire artistic practice is based on 3 things I discovered about myself while incarcerated. I realized then that my entire life was comprised of 3 identities: The child of illegal immigrants, the gang member, and the prisoner. But out of these three identities, I chose to create a new identity while incarcerated: the student.

**Fig.1- Title: My Mom and Uncle's Green Cards**



**“What I have found myself looking for in our age of the politics of ethnic identity and passionate conviction are alternative communities that have emerged with a great deal of their memory and private subjectivity still preserved.” (Said)**

My parents immigrated to America in 1977. They crossed the Tijuana border illegally. My father has told me that there wasn't much of a border in those days. People would cross over into San Ysidro walking on the beach. The ebb and flow of allowable immigration had shifted to the immigrants favor in those days. A year later I was born in Santa Barbara. An anchor baby is what they call kids like me. Having an American child allowed illegal immigrants in those days to stay in America as “Resident Aliens.” My first language was spanish, but I picked up the majority language very quickly in Kindergarten. It was in Kindergarten that I experienced the first situation of many where I was made to realize that I was not the same as the majority. One of the first things I learned to say in English was “wetback.” I couldn't have been more than 4 or 5 years old, but even that young I was already aware I was being laughed at and looked at as somehow inferior. Back in those days that derogatory slur was meant for Mexican people, and in

time, any other brown skinned people south of the U.S. border. I believe that this slur has survived because of the cultural strength of the people it tries to belittle. In the passage above, Said speaks of "alternative communities" with "a great deal of their memory... still preserved." Los Angeles is a good example for this passage. Think about East L.A., Chinatown, Little Armenia, K town, and many more communities of people who have held onto their cultural heritage and have preserved these identities in an ever changing American society.

The artwork that accompanies the Said quote includes my mother and her brother's greencards from 1984. The i.d.'s, which may be fake, have been nailed onto a piece of used plywood I found among my father's junk pile he keeps at his house. As a kid, I would look at these greencards a lot. A slang term that Mexicans use for fake greencards is "mica". People who come to this country illegally usually end up buying micas in order to work and provide some type of identification. The obvious majority opinion on micas would be that laws are being broken, that illegals are criminals, that they are taking advantage of American ideals. Yet, we see them picking fruits in fields, washing dishes at restaurants, cleaning hotel rooms, even babysitting rich people's children; all legitimate jobs that must be obtained by presenting identification, identification that is usually bought at places like MacArthur Park in downtown Los Angeles. It's so easy for employers to play dumb like they did not know that the mica provided doesn't match the social security number provided, or that the mica provided looks nothing like a legitimate U.S. Customs and Immigration identification card or workers visa.

The questions I am investigating in the art piece: What is the minority opinion on micas? Am I really the son of criminals? Is the legitimacy of my American citizenship at question

because the people who gave birth to me entered this country illegally? I always saw my parents as heroes. If they were somehow taking advantage of Americas good graces, I never saw it. We lived in a shitty 2 bedroom apartment, five of us including my three sisters. Back then you could not apply for food stamps or government assistance with mediocre micas. My parents were so Mexican the other Chicano kids at my school would make fun of us; as if these kids, that were just as brown as me, were somehow better than me, because the only English my father could say was "no speak english."



Fig.2- Title: *CAUTION: NO SPEAK ENGLISH*

I got into a lot of fights as a kid because of this identity. So much so that it became easy for me to walk up to a kid and punch them in the face for any stupid remarks. Although I felt I was defending my identity, at the same time I started to develop an animosity toward my parents because of this difference between their Mexicaness and my Chicanoness. It was here that I started developing another identity in my life. As I grew up in my neighborhood I started meeting other kids with similar backgrounds. Kids who were getting fights, getting in trouble, some of them were even doing drugs. My parents were hard working people who didn't get home until late in the evening, which left me and my sisters with a lot of time without them. I spent a lot of this time with this new family of street kids in the neighborhood, which led to getting in trouble with the law. I was around 12 years old when police came looking for me for the first time. Although I actually did not do what they were accusing me of, I had developed a reputation in the neighborhood that allowed the police to zero in on me. They accused me of breaking into a neighbor's house and stealing things. They said they had the right to come into our home and look for these things. I remember that was the first time I had ever seen a cop dusting for fingerprints. These cops dusted our apartment for fingerprints so that they can match them to fingerprints they took from the home of the stolen property. They left the biggest mess of fingerprint powder! And that shit is hard to clean up! After this incident I developed a very bad view of police. Looking back at it, they had no right to come into our home, they had no right to conduct a crime scene investigation because they found no stolen property there. They took advantage of their power then because they knew a family of "wetbacks," wasn't going to say anything about it.

Fig-3-Title: Investigation #3

Medium-Forensic Fingerprint Powder on Plexiglass



Getting "jumped" into a gang is actually a common thing in Mexican-American communities in California. Pretty much any Mexican or Mexican-American person you meet has a family member or good friend connected to some gang. For me it started early in life. As much as I love my father and what he does, I had convinced myself at the time that I would never be like him and never break my back the way he did for minimum wage or less. This does not mean that I didn't do those laborious jobs that my dad knew so well. I was taught to paint houses, trim hedges, lay spanish tile, and clean office spaces. "So much work for so little money," I would always cry out, but on the side I was robbing, cheating, and stealing. I had become so caught up in making fast money with my gang that there was a moment in my teenage years that I thought my parents were idiots; being taken advantage of by a system that hates them. I had it all figured out then: I would get rich selling drugs and show my father that we didn't need to mow some white motherfucker's lawn for \$7 an hour. I had convinced myself that this corrupt reality I was born brown into owed me for all the messed up things that would happen to good people like my parents who worked hard and obeyed only to be ridiculed and tormented with hard labor. I couldn't see past the large amounts of money I would get from stealing cars, selling drugs, and robbing people, all crimes I was convicted of before turning eighteen years of age. It turned out that I was the biggest idiot. When I was 22 years old I was implicated in a crime in which a man was killed. Although I didn't do it, and eventually was exonerated of that charge, plenty of other charges I was guilty of landed me a 15 year prison sentence. I had added yet another mask to my roles in the theater of my life.



Fig.4- Title: Alien-A90953662/Inmate-V82511



**“Necessarily then, I speak of exile not as a privilege, but as an alternative to the mass institutions that dominate modern life. Exile is not, after all, a matter of choice: You are born into it, or it happens to you. But, provided that the exile refuses to sit on the sidelines nursing a wound, there are things to be learned: he or she must cultivate scrupulous (not indulgent or sulky) subjectivity.” (Said)**

This passage by Said reminded me of this artwork I did (Fig.4) where I compared my prison identification card with my fathers immigration card. I wonder if being exiled is truly not a matter of choice in one's life. It is true that I had no choice to be born into this body, but the choices I made to be sent to prison were entirely my own, although I can say honestly that at the time I was truly convinced that I would never be caught and sent to prison. The part of the passage that says “you are born into it or it happens to you,” is something that rings so true to my life. Nobody wants to go to prison. A lot of times I would see inmates at the county jail get on that transportation bus they call the “grey goose,” literally kicking and screaming. One way or

another your ass is getting on that bus. It happens to you. You are transported against your will to a place nobody wants to go to. It is almost as if you get transported to a parallel universe that exist on the outskirts of what we call reality. When you step off of that bus after being driven through 3 different gates, one of which is charged with an electric current 24 hours a day, you definitely feel you are not in Kansas anymore. You will meet your first prison guard who will ask you: "who do you run with?" a simple question that is meant to divide the prison race populations. Already knowing of this my answer was quick and confident: "Southern Mexican." Since the 1960s, southern california chicano gang members have been at war with northern california chicano gang members, yet another division perpetuated by the california prison system. One of the most important things about prison that you learn in the county jail is that you do not want to end up in a situation where you get placed with the wrong population. These systems of segregation start in county jail. Once you are placed in a holding space with "your people," you are given the first object by your new "owner." I say this because you are now officially "state property," you belong to the state of California until your sentence is complete. This new object you are given is a prison identification card. On this card is a head shot of your face along with your newly assigned prison number. Like my father so long ago, I had become a number, a number that had become more important in identifying who I am than my actual name.

Rights that citizens have out here are taken away. Privileges you have out here are taken away. You are given a list of books you cannot receive. You are given a good size book called Title 15, in which your prisoner rights are outlined. This book also outlines procedures for how you will be dealt with if you break laws in the Title 15. I became acquainted with this book very

well after I got in trouble for "taking trash off of the yard," a situation in which I participated in assaulting another inmate during a race riot. I have been shot at, beat by police, and jumped by enemy gang members on the streets, but nothing I have lived through is more frightening than a prison race riot. It was about ten minutes of absolute chaos. I guess one of the more frightening aspects of that situation was witnessing absolute human savagery toward a person of a different race. Some people belong in prison. My role in the situation was one of defense, but I did observe other inmates who truly had complete intentions on killing another person. The correctional officers that day shot two inmates with assault rifles, both in the legs, and other inmates, myself included were shot with rubber bullets. At the time it felt like the man I was fighting with had punched me hard in the leg, probably trying to hit me in the genitals, but later on I learned it was a rubber bullet. For my participation I was sent to the "hole," a type of prison for the prisoners. An exile for exiles that is technically called Administrative Segregation but is usually known as the "hole" or the "back." It was in the "back" that I finally realized I had hit what I call "rock bottom." That time was actually my third time in "Ad-Seg."

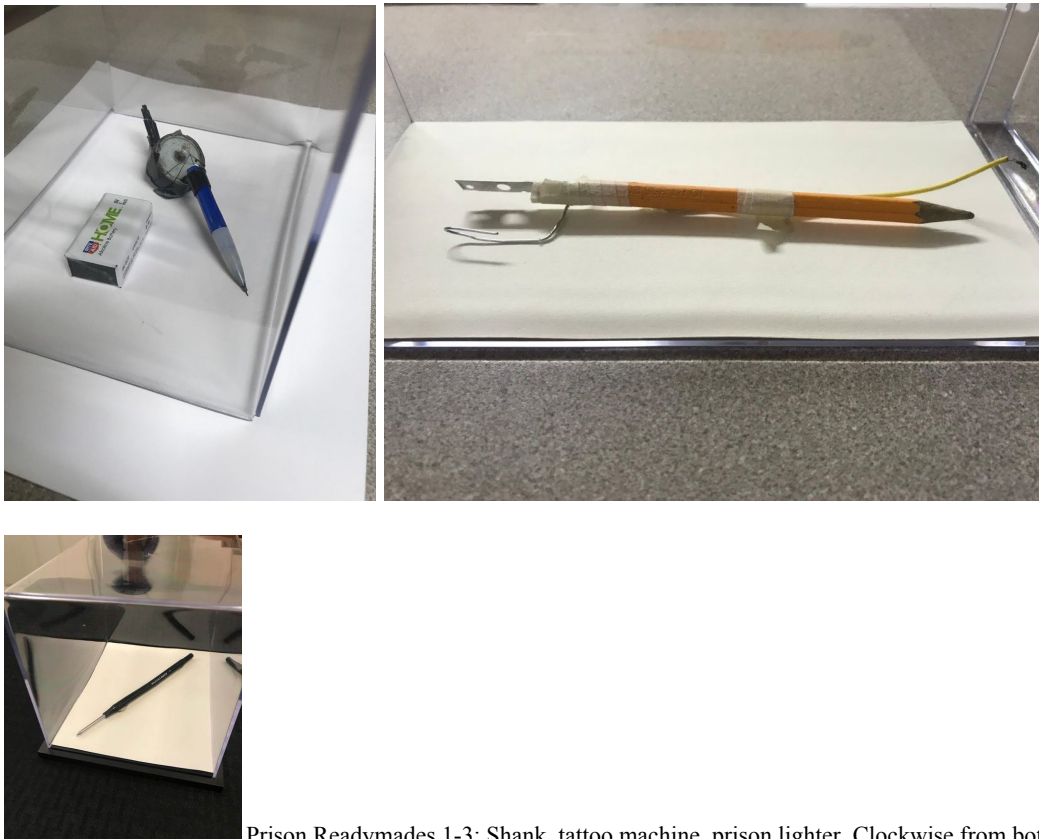
The Second time I went to the back was for getting caught tattooing. I had developed a name for doing ok tattoos so I had a nice little business doing tattoos on people. Apart from that I had started taking college courses, and some people started to know me for helping people with their English essays. That time in the hole I had met a "older homie", a fellow southern Mexican, who asked me if, when he got out of the hole, I can help him sign up for college classes. This older homie who went by the gang name Enano, which means midget in spanish, was actually still in the hole when I returned for the riot. In the hole, inmates are allowed to go out to a type a giant dog kennel they call the "cage". You are only allowed to go out to the cage 3 cells at a time,

and only for 1 hour a day, for exercise or to stretch your legs out. During one of these times out in the cage, Enano asked me a question that changed my life forever. He asked me: "what are you doing here?" I asked him what he meant by that, almost insulted. He asked me how much time I had left to go home, my answer was 8 years left. He tells me, "I get out in 80 years. My celly over there gets out in 120 years. Our neighbors over there, they both have life in prison. Never getting out! Even if they live to 200 they ain't never getting out. So I ask you again youngster, what are you doing here?" I really had no answer when faced with so many years! It was an impossible concept, trying to understand the idea of dying in prison. Enano then said something I could understand to me, "I know who you are, you help people. You are known as somebody who can help people, you are even willing to help me with the college stuff. You don't belong here youngster. You belong somewhere else, helping someone. In here we are all useless. My advice to you is take your chicken shit 15 years and go back out to the world and help somebody while you still can."

From that date I made a promise to myself to do everything I can in my power to get out of that prison. Not Ironwood, I knew I would eventually get out of that hell on earth. I'm talking about the prison I had built in my mind. A lot of people will tell you that all you find in prison is predators and prey, but that is a generalized statement. I found salvation in prison. I found art in prison. I found education in prison. I also found someone in prison who believed I could be better. I needed to hear it from the people I was trying to be like, that I was not like them. A moment of truth only takes seconds, but lasts forever. Eventually I was transferred out of Ironwood to a private prison in the state of Mississippi. Although not in California, this private prison handles any prison overcrowding issues for California. It is an example of what I call the

privatization of correctional institutions. These companies are traded publicly on the new york stock exchange. They are private businesses that specialize in housing prisoners. They are also an example of the issues in mass incarceration that America is suffering from at the time. They have locked up so many people, and is has become such good business, that they have allowed private companies to get in on the action. As state property, I could not fight this move to such a far away place. It became nearly impossible for my family to visit me. The correctional officers in Mississippi were 99% black women, who were being paid the state minimum, which in Mississippi is about \$8/hour. Corrections Corp. of America, and other private corrections companies, have created a business out of exiling people. It is at this prison that I realized the potential for common prison made items to be pieces of art.

Fig.6 The Privatization of Correctional Institutions: Prison Readymades



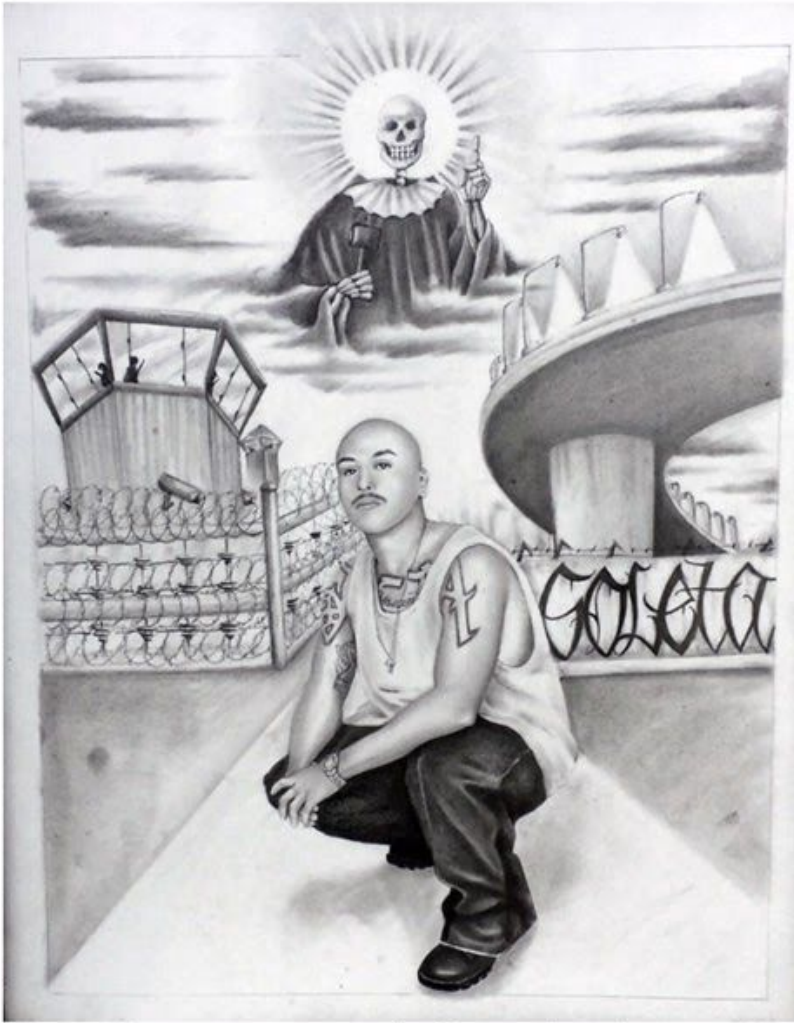
Prison Readymades 1-3: Shank, tattoo machine, prison lighter. Clockwise from bottom.



**"Exiles, emigres, refugees, and expatriates uprooted from their lands must make do in their new surroundings, and the creativity as well as the sadness that can be seen in what they do is one of the experiences that has still to find its chroniclers."( Said)**

The part of this passage that speaks of certain experiences that has "still to find its chroniclers," is probably what I came away with as actually speaking to me directly. Other passages, such as the ones I have chosen to speak on here, were speaking about me. But this passage is one that I felt Said speaking directly to me! Saying to me: "what are you waiting for? You have the experiences! Share them! Let them know the truths you have seen! Let them see the beauty of creation exists in even in the most wretched! Let them know that hope exists in even the darkest dungeons. That the borders, and divisions, and segregations you have in you have allowed you to show humanity something new and special!"

I paroled on May 27, 2016. Two weeks later I was enrolled at Santa Barbara City College. Since then I have focused on sharing my life with other people who have been formerly incarcerated and impacted by the American prison system. I decided to major in art because I am an artist. I belong to a student organization here at UCLA called Underground Scholars, a group of formerly incarcerated students who focus on helping and supporting each other as well as those still behind the walls, with the same message that education is a key to freedom. Obviously we are not a big organization, but we are here and we are not afraid to admit and share our lives in the hopes that society will stop the mass incarceration of minorities. There are more prisons in California than UC and CSU's combined. I would like to see that reversed in my lifetime.



Title: Fresh Out, May, 27, 2016 (Self Portrait) Medium: Graphite

**Borders and barriers, which enclose us within the safety of familiar territory, can also become prisons, and are often defended without reason or necessity. Exiles cross borders, break barriers of thought and experience. (Said)**

This passage gives me the most hope. I think of the proposals by the current White House administration to build a wall. But I also think of the fact that it has not been built yet. I think of my entire life being a series of borders, bars, cages, boxes, and how I was able to somehow not let them trap me. I become hopeful that others will do the same, and not let themselves be trapped or enclosed by a false sense of security by people who have monetary interest in mind by



building new walls for us to live within. I think of the distance I created from my parents, who came here for a better life, and the divisions created within my own people by a system who at times seems to want division more than unity, and remain hopeful that by sharing these experiences of being exiled in my own land, I can help and bring people together.