What Color is Freedom?
Writing the World Beyond Incarceration
Introduction

When I was in prison, writing to me meant existing. One day, as I imagined my future beyond those walls, I started writing a poem which inspired the title for this collection: “So I wrote until my composition pad turned the color of freedom”

The BRIDGE is a grassroots partnership of incarcerated leaders, their families, Voices for Racial Justice and partners. We believe building a bridge from prison to community and developing the organizing power of those most impacted by our system of mass incarceration is necessary in pushing for real change. At the heart of the BRIDGE, is an approach that transforms pain and honors healing and resilience strategies as key in nurturing the humanity, gifts and voices of the community.

This fall, as we were all moving through the chaos and turbulence of 2020, the BRIDGE Writing Cohort gathered for the first time. This effort was born of the desire to have a movement space within the BRIDGE grounded in art and storytelling. This cohort of artists came together to paint strokes of freedom across each other's screens as we met to hold space together in this digital world.

This year tested our resolve in so many ways both individually and collectively, but I was taught to protect the things that are sacred. We honor them, as we do this offering of story and poems. Art often asks us questions that forces us to use our imagination to answer them, and I would like all of you to pause before you read any further and ask yourself What Color Is Freedom?

As you join us, I ask that you breathe one time for yourself, breathe again for me, and breathe one last time for all of us. Voices For Racial Justice presents you The Color of Freedom.

Thank you to the Minnesota State Arts Board for your support of the BRIDGE Writing Cohort and this publication.

Kevin Reese,

Director of Criminal Justice
Voices for Racial Justice
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The Bridging the Gap Workshop “A Thought Caused It All”
By: Kevin Reese

Can’t talk about writing and the BRIDGE in the same sentence without honoring our history of writing in the Minnesota Spokesman Recorder. Shout out to Tracy Dillard Williams, Jerry Freeman and the whole entire MSR staff and contributors. The following article is our inaugural Bridging the Gap article published by the MSR in October of 2014. This was the Genesis of the BRIDGE transcending time and space through art and storytelling.

As I sit here at my desk, in Lino Lakes Correctional Facility, I watch the mid-afternoon traffic of highway 35 pass my window. I’m subdued by the sound of early October rain as it hits my window sill. I can hear the sound of jangling keys, as they pass my door, the ever present, presence of the correctional officer. Usually it makes me nervous, but today it does not.

Over the last ten years, while I have been incarcerated, I’ve been called a lot of things but today I sit here to write this as something that I’ve never been called before. Today I am a Historian. According to Webster’s Dictionary, the definition of a Historian is: a student or writer of History. On October 01, 2014, History was made at Lino Lakes Correctional Facility, and I was blessed to be a part of it, now I am privileged to write about it.

“A Thought Caused It All.” The thought was that maybe I could do something to change the life of my friend in cell 108, because he is really having a hard time. Maybe I could serve as a bridge to help him through the muddy terrain of why his behavior five minutes ago is affecting the way people treat him right now. The thought was that if I could get a group of black men in a circle to talk, then maybe black men would understand why it’s important to gather in circles and talk. The thought was a bold thought, inspired by some reading of Supreme Understanding, who said “Life shrinks or expands in proportion with one’s courage; and when you begin thinking for yourself, you have to get smart enough to defend your ideas.” The thought was critiqued and called militant by some, and revolutionary by others. The thought was suppressed by the powers that be, and told that in the physical space in which it existed, there was no room for it; so it went on the road. On the road it was introduced to other thoughts which helped it grow. It grew into an institution where every Saturday at 1:30 PM the doors were open for teaching and learning. The thought was introduced to Vina Kay, who gave it wings and helped it fly. The thought worked with people, cared for people, and was convinced there had to be a better way. “A Thought Caused It All.”
The Bridging the Gap Workshop was the manifestation of the thought working and grinding, trying to figure out what it is and define itself. October 01, 2014 the thought found out EXACTLY what it is.....

The thought is a B.R.I.D.G.E, which means: Bringing Righteousness, Integrity, Dignity, Goals, and Evolution. With major emphasis on the E and evolution. Which means: a Process of Change in a particular direction. The Bridging the Gap Workshop was a major step in nudging the needle forward towards actual change.

On this day, under one roof: Educators, Lawyers, Activists, DOC Officials, the DOC Commissioner, Students, Artists, Organizers, Employers, Pastors, Therapists, and as one guest proudly proclaimed herself Agitators, and 150 Inmates, gathered together to discuss the missing links between the DOC and the incarcerated, and the community and the incarcerated. There was electricity in the room. As the award-winning spoken word artist, Guante, so accurately stated during his performance, “I was struck by lightning….I mean I was literally struck by lightning!”

Can you imagine the power in the room as Professor Nekima Levy-Pounds expressed the ramifications of the school to prison pipeline, in a room full of juvenile detainees, turned DOC inmates? Well imagine that and times it by 100, and that still does not explain the force that day had on me. In my heart and mind, I remember it as a lightning rod that shot through me. I will use it to fuel my fight moving forward and no matter what obstacles tomorrow brings, the courage and hope from October 01, 2014 will always get me through.

What I took from the event reminded me of the beauty of the human spirit, the very thing that makes us human, and that is our ability to believe in one another and care enough about the next person to invest in their future.

I, Kevin Reese, am humbled to be the vessel that God has used to bring this thought into the world. I am grateful for my friend and Hero, Vina Kay, who has believed in me and invested her time and resources in an effort to help me in any way that she could and can. Vina, I bow my head to you in gratitude.
The Fourteenth Summer

By: Kevin L. Reese

June
I crashed into a metal door
not on purpose, but in the unintentional way one signs up for a robbery a
week before Xmas and leaves with not the goods but a bag of black bones.
It was my fault.
I know better than rushing through time that I purchased with skin.
It felt like the fuck you the door has been displaying for 13 years finally was
spoken.
I embraced it
and stuffed my hands in my mouth to swallow the hurt. Skipped the chow
hall, told my Queen not to visit the next day, you can't come into a prison
visiting room with a black eye and say the door did it. but the door did do it,
the door did do it
I took a nap instead, I needed to be inspired, so I wrote until the pages of
my composition pad turned the color of freedom... What color is freedom?

July
While in a phone line waiting to call rain
I drifted to a Vision of 20 fingers interwoven together
a covenant of companionship
anchored by a moment
sipping the champagne of loyalty
boasting of certainty
bursting with naivety
She didn't answer until the last day of the month.
It was the last time we would speak. I felt like a guitar with no strings.
August
I dreamed of owl wings and bowling balls for a week straight.
Every morning I awoke to a family of ducks praying outside my cell.
{They vibrated God}
I shaved my head while listening to my grandmother sing me a song

~Lord, Lord, Lord you know you been good to me~

I prostrated in silence
I seeked it.

For the first time I considered why I call myself black?
Why do we call ourselves death?
so I wrote myself free.

Up ahead the glow from a punctured moon
and the silhouette of a woman motioned me forward.

I began to see the end.
Love and Hate
By: Antoinette Johnson

Red is a color of love and hate
I dream with the thought of love overcoming hate
as I sit and think on this day a black woman who has a reason to see red as a color of hate not only for myself but for George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, Trayvon Martin, Philando Castile and so many others
as I say their names love begins to overcome hate
love is a word that will always win
in the end hate has no power over love
now say their names and say it with love

Freedom Color
By: Antoinette Johnson

My freedom color is yellow because its bright like the sun
every time I see this color I know I have won another inch of freedom
freedom comes in so many ways I found freedom in my soul
so I dance with colors made up of the rainbow
my freedom is near and that I can feel
like the little green man who looks for his pot of gold
I walk for my freedom looking for that light at the end of the tunnel that shines yellow I see it so bright and near I found my freedom color
Free at last free at last thank God for yellow my freedom color I'm free at last!
"ask why does it always have to be about race? because you made it that way!...because it's taken my papa's and my grandma's time, my mother's and my father's time....how much time do you want for your progress?"
--Danez Smith, "dear white america"

Black folk celebrate African American Firsts
like it's the ceremonial cornerstone
placed in a Thirteenth-story brownstone.
My brothas and sistas, that foundation is fissured.

Vanessa Williams was the first African American woman
to win Miss America. Was she the first African American woman
that was beautiful, charismatic, full of talent, articulate and intelligent?
She absolutely wasn't the first. So we Black folk aren't the culture
with full property rights to this 40-acres of pride.

Purple people-eating Alan Page was the first African American
named to the Minnesota Supreme Court.
Was he the first African American
with an astute legal brain in all of Minnesota's existence?
Is the right demographic taking pride in this achievement?

Becoming Miss America or a judge in the state supreme court
is a great accomplishment mainly due to individual work. BUT,
being an African American First
has little to do with a Black person's personal effort.
African American Firsts are a testament to the achievement
of White America and the hurdles they have overcome.
Go ahead White folk, sing....

"We shall o-ver co-o-ome. We shall o-ver co-o-ome.
"We shall over come, some day, ayee-ayee-aye."
Vanessa and Alan are just a few of the four-score and seven plus a few million-man-marches more that are symbolic of the folks who saw beyond the scope of their race and decided to push their culture beyond it's hate. It was never Black folks' burden to prove themselves to American arrogance. We already knew we had gifts to make America great again.

(Shout-out to my Native brethren.)

So, Black folk, next time African American Firsts are being honored, slap your White brethren on the back and say,

"Hurray! That's some tough shit your culture overcame. Keep up the progress!"
PAINTING THE WORLD THE COLOR OF HERITAGE (a cento poem)
By: Jeffery Young

What if truth can be crafted
out of bad angles rooted in heartbeats?

Born in the soil of soul,
like the truth I
don't gotta dance.

Even if you over-rotate slightly,
like the river we are music.
Someone says that is only
a poem. But blind folk
heard it wrong.
I wish I knew how

love could pluck the gray grit.
I’d free all black diamonds and pearls.
Their minds captured in rusting
chains, they run along crooked
teeth; hope to stumble upon
how it would feel to be free.

Hateful men love the sound
of grinding teeth. American
traditions teach us you can
get to Heaven by dance.

One time, not your’s or my time,
(depending on who you ask--
I'm still undecided), we danced
like that and sang every note
loud--especially the wrong ones--
and no one called us home.
Dancers danced that glorious suicide. Torn between two worlds, we danced away from Africa. That hour was dark, everywhere, all darkness. As a result, botched dreams intrude upon fact. And we believed all of them. What remains of our origins?

No matter what, a poet makes use of dissonance. No matter what, even when we break we spit kaleidoscopes, the promised light. Detonation begins in the slim inch between the dancer's body and the spiritual unknown. Paint a picture outside the lines, spirit hopped out something compelling. Spoke only of Georgia-clay red, saffron yellow, endless black, and sashaying green making a paradise. A place to raise kids in. God had been listening all this time, like he had planned the feat all along. I think he is laughing at the hateful, blind and deaf to an African firefly. But they saw us glowing anyhow. Some might call it the Holy Spirit, the Godself.

Revolutionaries, gather around. Raise your fist and practice risk. We don't gotta dance to be free. We be eternal music making a world somewhere in America boogie to our rebels beat.
The Next Chapter of America
By: Kahlee Griffey

Through the eyes of an honorable elder, We are the ones to pull us up, out of the ashes And rebuild. We feel the energy of new life forming amongst us We question whether were called in a time when we will see a new day Through the eyes of a historian, We are the carriers to turn the ash to light Our elders whom have lived and breathed the progress of the past, this is different. We know it’s real. We’re listening, to the wisdom from stories of historical patterns We're equipped and ready, up is our only option, but also our fate. Here we come.

A Distant Perspective
By: Kahlee Griffey

We've already been given all that we need to physically solve the problems of this world, but we rely on the building of the right experiences to reveal the solutions. Sometimes we avoid these experiences that we know we need. To avoid feeling and dealing with our own pain we hope no one can see. Some people make avoiding trauma their true hustle to get through this life and get to the next. But those who are willing to dive into their hurt are the ones who find the light. The solution. The next move and the role they've been uniquely designed to fulfill. When we stay in what we know to be true, it remains what we know to be true. If we want to see the real truth, the truth without 2 sides, we must find our own truth to begin to see the actual truth. Come take your place.
Be Free
By: Lewis McCaleb

From the moment you born
They snatch away your crown
Your family is scorned
They try to keep you down
But everything is full circle when it comes back around Are you gonna be another slave building up the town
Or take back your crown
Have everything reclaimed
Walk into your power
Teach others to do the same
Yes, some just want to see us in a box or a grave
But look at where we’re at and how far we done came
Yes we can be free
Free, freedom is really knowing yourself
Free Free, Freedom is taking care of your health
Free, Free, Free, Freedom is generational wealth
Breaking generational curses and making it out of hell Born in the hood feel like we hypnotized
See me with my hoodie on and now I’m stigmatized
I really be the truth they living in a lie
Just know it’s fire in the youth, you see it in our eyes Land of the free we just want to make money
But this land full of greed they just want to take from me America is not a country it’s a corporation
Built upon corpses and enforcing all this enslavement Horrible racists controlled the nation I’m losing patience My people facing systematic oppression through economic devastation, mass incarceration, and multi generations of trauma, past down from mommas and grandmommas
To our father who were taken from out of our homes
Stripped of identity got us looking like skeleton bones We have to learn how to own
Because we can no longer afford to rent
Feel like it’s us versus the world so in these verses I choose to vent The police were destroying tents and terrorizing the homeless There’s a thin line between law and moral in these moments People bogus,
Im not feeling like a civilian
Got me like hashtag save the children
We Gon Be Free #SaveTheChildren
-Lewiee Blaze
What Color Is Freedom?
By: Antonio

Freedom is the color of a pregnant mother's breath; hues of a baby's first smile, blended with the heart wrenching scream of her mother upon its death. Its color is the raw flaky, burnt skin of a melanin deprived body praying to the sun, hoping to get a little darker.

It’s the angst bleeding from black bodies after being mutilated, castrated and raped. It’s that fiery red-orange seeping through the fingers during a failed attempt to hold dignity in after being called a boy well into your 50’s. Freedom is the same color as those purple-black and white spots at the back of my eyelids after I had my head rammed into a wall by a couple of prison guards. It’s the same silver as the handcuffs that kept me from fighting back. Freedom is the color of that mythical rainbow that has all the shades of black and brown in it.

It's the gradations of safe havens that makes Minnesota nice for some. And it's those blends of dark, dank and devious destinations alienated from Mainstreet; where concrete's depressing hues of grey, sometimes painted a sterile white, cages millions of bodies. But it's so much more...

I never thought about freedom as a color. It's a beautiful and scary concept. The truth is for generations freedom has been a color-a pigment. This designation has bound freedom; has stolen its meaning no matter how clear the textbook definition is; regardless of how many times religious scripture uses it to bring together profound messages that are meant to edify the spirit and allow one's soul to soar past its temporal shell.

For too long freedom has been dictated by a certain class. Those in black robes, uniforms and suits take freedom from the shining souls clothed in many shades of brown skin.

What is the color of trauma? What is the color of pain, of mental anguish and heartache? Is it the color of the person or thing that caused it? What is the color of faith? Of hope? What is the color of the mind which has proven capable of overcoming seemingly insurmountable circumstances? It must be the color of every human being given one.
I AM FROM  
By: Calvin Boswell  

I am from the eye contact that caused the heartbeat to quicken,  

between two strangers without purpose who would refuse not to speak,  
roots that stretch deep, to a land of 98 degrees  
night time, guitar and saxophone shaped neon lights, that glisten off the black  
shiny face of one of down south’s finest blues and jazz players.  

I am from the johnsons that endured generations of animalistic torture,  
surviving only to give a gift of freedom to those who they conceived out of love.  

only to arrive on a land where, puffs of dust-balls escape benefit your feet at every step,  
until you look ahead and see fields of green fur-like grass,  
that taper into big oak trees that seem never ending,  

a paradise of shade in scorching heat.  
a simple cotton stuffed doll, for the  
Black coiled hair smiling girl in a long dingy white dress, stones and broken sticks  
for the black beaded head boy full of joy,  

if this is it, then okay  
just let the monster called slavery sleep,  

because before then we were from a land seas apart where men and giant beast  
lived side by,  

and walked barefoot on barren stone-like dirt, like a finished plate if chicken, bare  
bones lay lifeless,  
rotten and putrid to my new adopted senses  

but to them it smelled of survival,  
where men was not the survival ticket,
but harpoon heads made of bones, 1ft long, arrow heads made of iron and flint 3to 4in, broke the flesh of beast not men, and before then,

six thousand years ago, African women and men gather wild plants as they watched the plants be nurtured by the river of life,

old sahara being the cradled of early African civilization, and not the deserted dusty wind storm sand-paper trail it is today, i am from the first international trade; the golden age, the land of the beginning
The Color Of Freedom Is Black.
By: Julia Freeman

The color of freedom is black. Black is the presence of all colors. Every crayon in the box when mixed together makes the color black. If you break a crayon it still colors and creates beautiful pictures. This speaks to Black resilience. Just like those crayons the brokenness of black generations still sustains their beautiful essence. Even through historical trauma. Rising up in every black hue as histories stamp to each brick added to freedom's road. That road colored by blood of many shades, spirits filled with freedom cries, hearts lifted by freedom songs and marches of resistance stirring hope. The youth in every shade are stirred to action to march for freedom holding, waving and wrapping themselves in a black banner that we matter. They know freedom isn't colorblind. The color of freedom is Black.
14,
By: Alex Cardenas

I walk, I crawl, stand all but tall yet here I am, land dead for all. A foot in toe, we ran and stole. Lived in brick our lives through No's. I hate I love, I liked enough but none below but all before. Beyond this life we let unfold, we made it spin alas untold. We say we spit we yell and bit. Write it all to have it finally wrote. You are me and I am you, one in kind despite as knew. We are the same, both true and few. We fixed our lives however new, thru and thru to better you for me and him, for you and you. Life a risk but all for new. We got a shot to start anew, fresh as death and true in depth. Taken or not it's all in debt but you are me and I am him, all the same we sink or swim. One in kind were all alike, ride thru life thru the same bike. Prison made the man it broke, lives were stolen, bloke for bloke. Now we're free for all to see that you and I are only me, a reflection of none for all to see that he is I and I am he. The judge in the mirror is merely seen that he's like us, human beings.

What A time
By: Alex Cardenas

Born at night, dead by day, an angel of dark a demon shall lay. I light the path that you can't see, bars are cold as ice to me. Good and bad as he and me, I am the only one to be. Breathe I don't yet lungs I need for my breath is warm and all I need. Food at dawn yet I don't eat. Feed me life and bury me. Six feet under or six feet over, the healthier I get the colder gets colder. Evil thoughts consuming me, angelic deeds controlling thee, screams I need to center muah but silence seems to level me. Good at night I kill today, if I make it past your stay. Remember to forget you me for dead I've been inside of me, live your life despite thee for killers roam beyond just free yet I here stand with bars and keys, head to toe surrounding me. Yes alike but all the same, another try before my fate as I do me and die again.
Child so divine
By: Monique Weber

Use your breath - until the end
To speak your truth
To fill the world with love
You are our future!

Freedom?
By: Monique Weber

What color is freedom?
Is that a fucking question!
What freedom?
What fucking freedom?
Freedom shouldn’t even exist in Merriam-Webster
How free was the ass that created this word -
Filled with bullshit;
A false belief manifested
If you truly feel free
You must be that superior white male
Feeling his small dick on the top of the caste system
Take your freedom
Take your white supremacy
Take your money
Undergo a penis enlargement
To go along with your fake ego…..

Ooooh and go fuck yourself and your freedom!!
Key to Freedom
By: Monique Weber

Men beyond enclosed walls;
Bars that dissipate your ever so beautiful humanity;
And encase your desired faces
You are my friends

Every moment I walked through those locked gates
On hard marble flooring
Peering through windows with welded metal
My wonder was...
How will you all inspire me that day;
Lift me up from that negative environment?
How would I
Make your day an ounce more bearable

Y'all are my inspiration
You all fed air into my lungs
Words to my mind
Love to my heart

Words of gratitude
Could never speak to the magnitude
Of the power you fed into my soul

Our deep friendships
I hold as a treasure chest
With hopes to find the key
To unlock you all into my arms

Until those days arrive..

I, my friends
Will be right here
Waiting
Impatiently
Arms wide open

Love you all!
Shadow
By: Monique Weber

Living in the shadow of my past
I move forward then
Move backwards
Left to right
The shadow won’t let me escape

It drowns me like a hurricane
It consumes the life of me like a tornado
It shatters my life like an earthquake

I try and recover the pieces
But the damage is done
Impossible to restore that once
Beautiful
Soul

I cry..
I cry...
And I cry

This fight for survival is getting old
Please light just shine on
Is this my life?
Is this my worth?
Can no one see beyond this damn Shadow?
What Is The Color Of Freedom?
By: Essence Blakemore

Freedom is the color of water,
Freedom looks like me. Freedom looks like you.
Freedom is fluid.
Freedom stares back into your eyes.
Freedom is transparent. No color, just a feeling, a movement, a rhythm, a soul.
Freedom is humanizing.
Freedom isn't up for a debate.
Freedom isn't something you miss.
Freedom is never delayed.

Freedom ain't white, Freedom ain't black, or green, or red.

Freedom is my DNA.
Freedom?
My Freedoming coming any day.

I drink my Freedom straight from the glass.
I drink my Freedom from the glass.

I may drink second, but never last.
Freedom looks like H2O.
Just molecules scrunched up.

Freedom. Ain't no rainbows freed me.