



READING AND DISCUSSION GUIDE

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FROM THE FOREWORD FOR
LIKE A HAMMER,

“This powerful collection of poetry, *Like a Hammer* brings the voices muffled by the thick walls and bars of the prison to life. It refuses the ‘common sense’ that the imprisoned deserve the harshness that prison and state officials have encouraged and cultivated. Not only does this collection bring these voices to the surfaces: if we listen, the incarcerated have something to say about life, love, politics, power, our world and what to do about it. Their voices, this poetry, obliterates all that we have been told about the imprisoned, their families, their communities. The collection is not just from the incarcerated but it also collects the writing of the formerly incarcerated and those who love them. The writing inspires but it also ignites and infuriates because these are people who deserve to be freed from the prison—as do they all. No civilized society should rely upon the threat of violence, brutality and banishment as a response to loneliness, sadness, hunger and despair. I am now more convinced than ever before that the imprisoned are the true victims of our deranged society; this poetry is the evidence.”

— Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

This guide was designed for classrooms, study groups, book clubs, and individual readers interested in reflection, study, and action. It serves as an invitation to think deeply about the carceral state and to envision a world without surveillance, without policing, and without prisons. Our guide includes companion questions for each section of *Like a Hammer: Poets on Mass Incarceration*, and a resources section that includes additional tools, organizations, and further reading. Choose what resonates with you and use the guide to spark discussion, reflection, journaling, your own writing, or to think deeper about the poems in this anthology and the people who wrote them.

FOREWORD: THE ARMY OF THE WRONGED BY KEEANGA-YAMAHTTA TAYLOR

1. What did Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor experience during her high school's Scared Straight program? What did the program communicate about working-class people of color? How did it dehumanize the people she interacted with?
2. How does Taylor connect her experiences with loneliness and deprivation to the experiences of people in prison? How are narratives about prisons and crime impacted by race and class?

INTRODUCTION BY DIANA MARIE DELGADO

1. What life experiences led Diana Marie Delgado toward editing this anthology? How does she recommend readers move through this book? What are some other ways you might approach this book?
2. How can art influence how we think about prisons and human beings who are incarcerated? What do you hope to learn or gain from this anthology?

I. TIME RULES THIS EMPIRE: WHERE CLOCKS STAND STILL

1. How do poets in this section experience time? What was your experience of time as you read this section?
2. How does the United States prison industrial complex function as an empire (a political unit with a large number of peoples under one ruler with total authority)? How is power written about throughout this section—who has it, who enforces it, who wants it, and how does it move?
3. What do we lose when incarceration separates people from their communities? How is Natalie Diaz separated from her family in her poem “Under Correction I”? Who benefits from this kind of separation?
4. What is Reginald Dwayne Betts's relationship with family in his poem “Blood History”? Read an earlier version of this poem, published in 2019: <https://poets.org/poem/>

blood-history. Did this reading change your understanding of the more recent poem? If so, what changed?

5. How does Vanessa Angélica Villarreal detail the conception of the prison in “Architect 1”? What must we imagine in order to undo the crisis of mass incarceration? How can you cultivate your own imagination as a step towards building a more just world?

II. BE CAREFUL HOW YOU SPEAK ABOUT RAINBOWS: BEAUTY & GRACE

1. What are some moments of beauty described by poets throughout this section? How do these moments contrast with descriptions of hardship and isolation?
2. How does Eduardo Martínez’s poem “A.G.A.M.” explore immigration and borders? How has language been used as a tool to create and spread divisions in the United States? How is the prison industrial complex intertwined with immigration?
3. Where are prisons often constructed? How does Marcelo Hernández Castillo describe the land around Folsom prison in his poem “Eclogue: A Field Guide and Cure”? What are some of the symbols and images used to signify healing?
4. How can humor be used by artists as a tool for survival? How does Tongo Eisen-Martin express both grief and humor in his poem “Knees Next to Their Wallets”?
5. What are some of the reasons why people create art behind prison walls? How can the act of creating art serve as an act of resistance? Read several short pieces by incarcerated artists, published by the Prison Journalism Project: <https://prisonjournalismproject.org/2023/06/01/how-people-make-art-in-prison>

III. THE BILL IS PAST DUE: THE HUSTLE

1. Who are some of the people written about in this section? What are some ways that this section details their daily acts of survival?
2. John Murillo’s poem “The Ballad of StagoLee, or Variation on a Theme by Sterling A. Brown with a Slight Nod to Etheridge Knight” builds on the oral tradition of the toast, popular among incarcerated men. How does Murillo use this form of storytelling to confront the police state? Where do you notice references to the traditional toast?
3. What words are minimized and what words appear dozens of times in the poem “black, body” by Candace Williams? How is this poem a response to racial profiling in the United States?
4. How does this section reference the poverty-to-prison pipeline? Where do you notice poets writing about the racial identities of people impacted by incarceration?
5. Learn more about cash bail and excessive bail funds. How are these practices used to keep people in jails as they await trial? Who is most impacted by these practices? Who profits from them? Is there a local bail fund in your community that provides bail to people in need? How can you support or amplify their work?

IV. AMERICAN INFERNO: INSIDE THE CELL

1. What are some of the types of deprivation that are described throughout this section? What are some of the objects, practices, and rituals that resist this deprivation?
2. How does Evie Shockley describe incarceration as a downward spiral in her poem “american inferno”? How does the shape of her poem emphasize this movement?
3. Do you know how much your state spends on incarceration? Start by researching your state’s budget for corrections over the past five years. How does this spending compare to what your state spends on education?
4. How do the poems in this section describe the function of the prison? (Is it to rehabilitate? To redeem? To punish?) What do you think is the purpose of incarceration? Should the prison industrial complex be abolished?
5. What are some of the hidden costs of incarceration? Read more stories about the prison economy and costs of incarceration published by the Prison Journalism Project: <https://prisonjournalismproject.org/tag/prison-economy/>

V. WHAT IS CAGED IS ALSO KEPT FROM US: HUMAN IMPACT

1. What are some of the restrictions and hardships described throughout this section? Where did you read instances of imagination and freedom?
2. How does Patricia Smith’s relationship with her son change throughout “But the phone rings sometimes”? How are families impacted by the incarceration of their loved ones?
3. How does Ada Limón describe the loss of a loved one in “what is caged is also kept from us”? What does it mean to grieve someone who is gone but not gone? Have you ever experienced this kind of grief?
4. How does Angel Nafis use the word “how” throughout “Ghazal to Open Cages” to explore the crisis of incarceration? Learn more about Nâzım Hikmet, the Turkish poet who was imprisoned for his beliefs. How is his story reflected in this poem?
5. How has your community been impacted by incarceration? Are there any groups or organizations in your area that support people who are most impacted by incarceration?

VI. THE NAKEDNESS DARK DEMANDS: SURVEILLANCE AND SHAPESHIFTING

1. What did you experience looking at the images in Vanessa Angélica Villarreal’s poem “Architect III”? How does Villarreal draw connections between people incarcerated in the United States in the eighteenth century and people incarcerated today?
2. How do voices and stories intersect with court documents in Patrick Rosal’s “Visitations”? Who is in conversation throughout this piece? How does migration relate to the prison industrial complex?
3. What is erased from Nicole Sealey’s poem “Pages Thirteen to Twenty-One from The Ferguson Report: An Erasure”? What was your experience reading this poem? What rises to the surface in Sealey’s chosen text?

4. What are some of the different forms of punishment that Natalie Diaz describes in her poem “Under Correction III”? How do other poems in this section analyze the logic—or illogic—within corrections?
5. How do poems in this section describe isolation and confinement? What organizations and coalitions exist to resist these forms of punishment? How can you amplify or join their efforts?

VII. LIKE A HAMMER ACROSS THE PAGE: THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM

1. Look closely at the photograph of George Stinney Jr. included with Nikky Finney’s “Black Boy with Cow, A Still Life.” What do Stinney’s eyes communicate? How is he described throughout the poem?
2. What did you learn about Nikky Finney in this poem? How does she connect her own story and lineage to George Stinney Jr.’s? Did she want to be in the courtroom in South Carolina to report this story?
3. What are some of the possible meanings of the “BEFORE” and “AFTER” section titles? When is it important to look closely at the past when repairing present-day harms?
4. What do young people incarcerated and detained in the United States experience? What are some of the racial disparities found within current juvenile incarceration rates?
5. Listen to Nikky Finney read the poem: <https://voca.arizona.edu/track/id/60886>. How did you experience the poem differently when listening to it? What words and phrases does Finney emphasize in her reading?

RESOURCES

LISTEN

- ◇ Voca, the University of Arizona Poetry Center's audio-visual archive, includes readings from many of the poets in this anthology: <https://voca.arizona.edu/>
- ◇ The Poetry Centered podcast features an episode on Radical Reversal, a project co-founded by poet Randall Horton: <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/bonus-radical-reversal-in-birmingham/id1518900456?i=1000608576003>

LEARN

- ◇ Interrupting Criminalization is a movement resource hub committed to building a world free of violence, surveillance, policing, and punishment: <https://www.interruptingcriminalization.com/>
- ◇ The Prison Industry: Corporate Database exposes over 4,000 corporations and investors that profit from mass incarceration: <https://data.worthrises.org/>
- ◇ MPD150 offers an extensive list of books, articles, essays, and toolkits to help envision a world without prisons: <https://www.mpd150.com/resources/>

READ

- ◇ The Quarry: A Social Justice Poetry Database published by Split This Rock includes a tag on 'criminal justice': <https://www.splitthisrock.org/poetry-database>
- ◇ The Prison Letters Project is a public database of letters from incarcerated writers: <https://prisonlettersproject.org/>
- ◇ *I Remember Death By Its Proximity to What I Love* by Mahogany L. Browne: <https://www.haymarketbooks.org/books/1743-i-remember-death-by-its-proximity-to-what-i-love>
- ◇ *The Sentences That Create Us: Crafting A Writer's Life in Prison* by PEN America, edited by Caitis Meissner: <https://www.haymarketbooks.org/books/1766-sentences-that-create-us>
- ◇ *The Essential Etheridge Knight* by Etheridge Knight: <https://upittpress.org/books/9780822953784/>
- ◇ *Survival Math: Notes on an All-American Family* by Mitchell S. Jackson: <https://www.mitchellsjackson.com/survival-math>

SUPPORT

- ◇ Freedom Reads provides libraries to people in prisons and was founded by poet Reginald Dwayne Betts: <https://freedomreads.org/>
- ◇ Free Time: Writers Inside and Out offers support and mentorship to writers who are incarcerated <https://poetry.arizona.edu/opportunities/get-involved/free-time-writers-inside-and-out>
- ◇ Learn more about, follow, and support other grantees of the Art for Justice Fund: <https://artforjusticefund.org/grantees/>

ABOUT THE EDITOR

Diana Marie Delgado has more than twenty years of experience working in nonprofits that promote social justice and the arts. Delgado's debut poetry collection, *Tracing the Horse*, was chosen as a *New York Times* Noteworthy Pick, and her chapbook *Late-Night Talks with Men I Think I Trust* won the Center for Book Arts Letterpress Poetry Prize. She is a first-generation Latinx community college graduate dedicated to diversifying the literary ecosystem and a proud member of the Macondo, Hedgebrook, and Cantomundo writing communities. Her early experiences growing up in Southern California serve as inspiration for her work and writing.

ABOUT THIS GUIDE'S WRITER

Rachael Zafer is a writer, organizer, graphic designer, and the author of discussion guides for over thirty books including *We Do This 'Til We Free Us* by Mariame Kaba and *Abolition for the People*, edited by Colin Kaepernick. You can view her discussion guides at www.rachaelzafer.com