



ARRIVING

Freedom Writings by
Asian and Pacific Islanders
Behind and Beyond Bars

Compiled by
Asian Prisoner Support Committee

ng your pictures?

Something in Common We Trust

Michael Manjeet Singh

Leading up to the concert, people would often ask, "Is Common actually gonna perform here?" Then on the day of the concert, as I came out to the yard at noon for my insulin shot, I saw a concert stage being set up. Inside the trailer of an 18-wheeler, there were huge speakers. It was super-amazing just to see the stage, because I hadn't seen one since the start of my incarceration in 1996 when I was just 21 years old. (I'm excited just recalling it!) At approximately 6:45 p.m. my housing unit was let out to the yard, after a security "pat-down" by the guards. I wheeled my wheelchair around the track. At first, I was limited to staying on the concrete. I could hear really loud thumping music and see hazy concert smoke and lights. Me and another disabled (blind) brotha stood at an ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act) table. The grass field quickly grew crowded.

Suddenly, an Inmate Disability Aid (IDA) worker came and wheeled me onto the grass, much closer to the stage. The show started and the audience exploded when Common, dressed in all black with a hoodie, energetically hit the stage. The noise got even louder when he started rapping! As I watched the show, I kept forgetting I was in prison, but I was jarred back to reality each time I saw a clique or crew walk in either direction. I've seen a lot in my 22 years of incarceration, and even on the street (free world) there are a lot of fights at rap concerts. Being disabled, I felt especially vulnerable.

But back to the stage—Common's energy radiated in a truly positive fashion! Leaving no race out, Common gave shouts of love and respect to us all: Asians, Blacks, Latinos, Native Americans, and Whites. I truly felt the impact of his songs' positive messages. No concert has ever made me think so much! It was an invitation to introspection, and like Scrooge in *A Christmas Carol*, I saw

my past, thought about where I was now, and even dared to dream about the future.

Please understand that as an LWOPer (a person serving life without the possibility of parole), dreaming is something I never do! This experience at the concert almost caused me to shed tears. In prison, it's taboo to expose vulnerability because it's always exploited as weakness. The Youthful Offender Program (YOP) inmates were loudly chanting, "Common, Common, Common!" YOP had gotten special time with the entire Anti-Recidivism Coalition (ARC) crew and Scott Budnick, founder of ARC, before the concert. Dudes I would've never thought was bobbin' they heads front to back and wavin' they hands back and forth! All races were intermingled!

Prison is a place where there's always gonna be people who don't like each other. Despite the fact that there was coverage in the darkness and it was incredibly crowded, there were no stabbings! No one snuck into the middle of the crowd to slice someone's throat. There wasn't even one fight! I was stunned that nothing happened! A true anomaly! I was so happy—because it proved that for one night, all of us could come together and hope for a better future. This was more important than for any one person to attempt something in the name of retribution or for the lure of false prestige and artificial respect for unnecessary violence that a gang gives members who "put in work for the crew." The concert was awesome. In between songs, Common reached out with positive messages for us all: he told us it was our future and that he was there for us (I really felt his authenticity). Common came down from the stage and hugged brothas of all races standing at the barrier. Back onstage, he asked, "We got any rappers out there? Who can rap?"

Suddenly, helped onto the stage was an Asian (Hmong) brotha, about 5½ feet tall, with four strands of braided hair, two on each side, same length as his height. Then the DJ started playing a beat and the crowd got hella "hyphy" (hyped up). The inmate rapper known as Cha-Zilla missed the starting beat, and the crowd simultaneously said, "Awww!" Then the next beat came and Cha-Zilla was on it! Spitting lyrics as the beats flowed, he held onto the mic with one hand and rhythmically moved the other to the enunciation of his words! It was hella cool! Common reached out to all of us and created a truly positive atmosphere. Even the staff got in on the act, nodding their heads and

Something i

recording the show with cell phone
entire duration of the ARC conce
(correctional officers). It felt like we

In my 22 years of incarceration, like it, and I mean that! Hope was a song, Common introduced his friends, they were as follows: DJ Ace; Julian, singing sista; and Phil, drums. Common like KRS-ONE, Big Daddy Kane, Jay-Z, and a few more. After performing, Common transferred more of Common's energy to other agencies helping us at the Baker Center; Gina Clayton-Johnson. I've come to know through my correspondence and shout-outs to us, SATF (Substance Abuse Treatment Facility) Warden Sherman for approving the concert. Scott Budnick got on the mic—he told us he was the finest Windy City native and how he got parole earlier. Afterward, former "liars" ARC spoke to the crowd, each saying "I served": "I did 22 to life!" "I brought me!" There were also two sistas, one Latina sista—"I did 25+ years (on an LWOP was onstage! I'm currently a sista). Shaka Senghor got on the mic and gave us a message for us and knew, as a former lifer, we won't forget!" My hopefulness, from the atmosphere of a past, present, and future emotional inside a prison, with convicted felons for the future with me embracing me the current force of ARC. Common

The whole experience energized me, I came to a realization that under my

ow, and even dared to dream about the

person serving life without the possibility
ever do! This experience at the concert
ison, it's taboo to expose vulnerability
ness. The Youthful Offender Program
Common, Common, Common!" YOP
Anti-Recidivism Coalition (ARC) crew
before the concert. Dudes I would've
front to back and wavin' they hands
gled!

gonna be people who don't like each
coverage in the darkness and it was
dings! No one snuck into the middle of
ere wasn't even one fight! I was stunned
ly! I was so happy—because it proved
together and hope for a better future.
y one person to attempt something in
of false prestige and artificial respect
ves members who "put in work for the
between songs, Common reached out
d us it was our future and that he was
). Common came down from the stage
g at the barrier. Back onstage, he asked,
n rap?"

Asian (Hmong) brotha, about 5½ feet
two on each side, same length as his
beat and the crowd got hella "hyphy"
as Cha-Zilla missed the starting beat,
www!" Then the next beat came and
he beats flowed, he held onto the mic
d the other to the enunciation of his
hed out to all of us and created a truly
in on the act, nodding their heads and

recording the show with cell phones in the air! It was like that for almost the
entire duration of the ARC concert—no one wore blue (inmates) or green
(correctional officers). It felt like we were one and without any racial barriers!

In my 22 years of incarceration, I've never seen or experienced anything
like it, and I mean that! Hope was inspired, unity was formed. In between
a song, Common introduced his fellow performers. To my best recollection,
they were as follows: DJ Ace; Julian, electric guitar; Abdul-Karim, background
singing sista; and Phil, drums. Common also talked about MCs he grew up to
like KRS-ONE, Big Daddy Kane, Rakim, and recent greats Tupac, Biggie,
Jay-Z, and a few more. After performing a few more awesome songs, which
transferred more of Common's energy to the crowd, he finished with shout-
outs to other agencies helping us and our families—Initiate Justice, the Ella
Baker Center, Gina Clayton-Johnson's Essie Justice Group (all organizations
I've come to know through my correspondence with them over the years)—
and shout-outs to us, SATF (Substance Abuse Treatment Facility) "E" yard,
Warden Sherman for approving the concert, and all the staff there. Then Scott
Budnick got on the mic—he told us he was with us and described Chicago's
finest Windy City native and how hard Common had fought for us at the
state capitol in Sacramento to help pass laws that would give us a chance to
parole earlier. Afterward, former "lifers" of all ethnicities who now work for
ARC spoke to the crowd, each saying his name and how much time he had
served": "I did 22 to life!" "I brought 30!" "I fought a 25 to life—y'all know
me!" There were also two sistas, one Black sista—"I did 20 years!"—and one
Latina sista—"I did 25+ years (on an LWOP)!" I could not believe it, a former
LWOP was onstage! I'm currently an LWOP! Then ARC executive director
Shaka Senghor got on the mic and gave us love, telling us he was working hard
for us and knew, as a former lifer, what we were going through—"I've worn
your shoes and I won't forget!" My night was an experience of positivity and
hopefulness, from the atmosphere of the concert (during which I experienced
a past, present, and future emotional journey) to the night free of violence—
inside a prison, with convicted felons, at a rap concert, no less. I gained hope
for the future with me embracing my skills just like the many former lifers in
the current force of ARC. Common said "Peace Gods!" to all his brothas- us.

The whole experience energized me, empowering me with hope, and made me
come to a realization that under my "state blues" is a guru untapped!

Note: In the days leading up to this event, I kept hearing about the Youthful Offender Program's sponsors and all the countless hours our counselor put in to ensure this whole ARC event would actually happen. Correctional Counselor I DeLa Cruz counsels and assists us to strive for better and greater things; he can break down lyrics and actually reach us inmates. I've made it a point to mention him because most staff become CCIs for the weekends off and/or lieutenant's-level pay. DeLa Cruz teaches us how to turn stumbling blocks into stepping-stones. That's why ARC's show happened here, at SATF.

Fighting Michael M

Books called it THE GREAT MIGR
Yet we fly in flocks & also remain lone
So do crows & many of them equal a
Birds of a feather, flock together
And the worst of vultures kill us all lit

With oppression & by smoke bombs,
The penitentiary is a place with fair w
This ain't no game, cause our wings a
That's why so many take black tar⁹ wi
Because for some it's better and easier
Instead of to fight the power and syst

To talk to yo' "Dear Mama" cost way
The guards charge you a thousand fo
'The Man' bringing you the coke to 'l
Wears a green jump suit & calls himse
Ironically, the very next day, you get 'c
In my world of prison, this is just you
My humanity is NOT up for negotiat
That's what has messed up this entire
Young lions SINGH (SIKHS), grow u
It's when you get older, that you see th

⁹ Black tar: heroin

¹⁰ Clapper: cell phone

¹¹ U/A: urine analysis test

ent, I kept hearing about the Youthful
e countless hours our counselor put in to
tually happen. Correctional Counselor
strive for better and greater things; he
ach us inmates. I've made it a point to
me CCIs for the weekends off and/or
ies us how to turn stumbling blocks into
w happened here, at SATF.

Fighting the Power

Michael Manjeet Singh

Books called it THE GREAT MIGRATION, but people aren't birds
Yet we fly in flocks & also remain lonesome doves
So do crows & many of them equal a murder
Birds of a feather, flock together
And the worst of vultures kill us all little by little with each passing day

With oppression & by smoke bombs, metal batons and O.C. Pepper spray
The penitentiary is a place with fair weather friends
This ain't no game, cause our wings are tied or clipped
That's why so many take black tar⁹ with a syringe and have dipped
Because for some it's better and easier to inject their veins with dope
Instead of to fight the power and system with their brains fueled with hope.

To talk to yo' "Dear Mama" cost way more than a dime
The guards charge you a thousand for a clapper¹⁰, then try to take mine
'The Man' bringing you the coke to 'blow'
Wears a green jump suit & calls himself a C.O.
Ironically, the very next day, you get 'called' for a U/A¹¹
In my world of prison, this is just your average and typical day
My humanity is NOT up for negotiation
That's what has messed up this entire state of the U.S. Nation!
Young lions SINGH (SIKHS), grow up in and are a Mother's pride
It's when you get older, that you see the system has truly lied.

⁹ Black tar: heroin

¹⁰ Clapper: cell phone

¹¹ U/A: urine analysis test

For My People

Michael Manjeet Singh

I'm what's called an "Other" 4 real
Cause in prison, behind these walls, that's the deal
When U R not black, white or brown
We (Others) got the smallest, tightest car (racial group) in this town
I speak my native tongue, Hindi and Punjabi
I love all my Indian food - especially chicken tandoori
When I say (Indian), it's not feather, but real 22 karat gold
And red dots, turbans and saris - a beautiful sight to behold
When I speak with my lovingly tight family
Only we understand our talk, so great 2 have privacy
We are a loving and loyal nuclear unit
When we pray, Indian-style is how we sit
After 9/11 (2001), racist times were abound and quite sad
Cause to be a genuine you (Punjabi) was seen as inviting the bad
But in spite of it all
We (Sikhs) stand mightily and tall
No matter who or where
There's always an Indian standing there
Ready to help after Hurricane Katrina or damaging storm
Cause for me and my people, to help others is our status quo, the norm
Culturally special events, the festival of lights - Diwali!
Wow! What a wondrous and special place to be!
Starting with the 5 K's²² in store
My culture, I'm always hungry to learn more
The Kesh, Khanga, Kara, Kirpan
and Kachera, also music Bhangra and Bhajan
I'm trying 2 learn all about my history
So I can truly be the best of me

²² 5 K's: In Sikhism, the Five Ks are items that Sikhs are to wear at all times. They are the Kesh (uncut hair), Kangha (comb), Kara (iron/steel bracelet),

About the Contributors

use color as well. Exploring outside of the typical black/white prison art has allowed him to venture off into the professional art world and successfully showcasing some of my art in multiple galleries. Through art, he has raised tens of thousands of dollars for charity like cancer awareness and for the youth at risk. He really enjoys expressing himself on a blank canvas, but what he enjoys more is giving back to our community and making a positive impact. It is through art that made it possible for him to make a difference in my community.

Michael Manjeet Singh is from Berkeley, CA. Incarcerated at 21 (1996), he's achieved many certifications including Microsoft and Paralegal. He spends time reading, writing and helping inmates assert their legal rights, despite staff retaliation. He immensely loves his mom (Purinma) and dad (Taru) and brother (Steven); their love fuels him. He maintains his innocence.



Maria "Kanaka" Luna was born in the Philippines, raised in San Francisco, and has recently put down roots in Los Angeles. Maria juggles two jobs: by day, she works for Homeboy Industries and by night, she serves as a drug and alcohol counselor for incarcerated men. Cultural diversity and racial equality are two important things to Maria: she believes strongly in becoming the people that our ancestors have always wanted us to be. Maria is a proud member of the LGBTQ+ community and lives with her fiancée. She hopes to one day add a dog to their family.



Nou Phang Thao is the fourth eldest of 10 children. His family and friends call him Phang. They come from a long line of compassionate Hmong elders, traditions, and culture. Just like these surviving customs and values, Phang responds to a crisis and life obstacles by being reasonable, caring, and kind. It's through these nurturing life forces that he can grow and become mature. He is proud to be Hmong and share his culture with the world.



A moving collection of poems, personal essays, and interviews by Asian and Pacific Islander writers who have been impacted by imprisonment, detention, and deportation.

During the prison boom of the 1990s, the Asian and Pacific Islander (API) prison population grew by 250 percent. This phenomenon's lasting effects continue to impact thousands of APIs throughout the United States today. However, these stories and experiences are too often made invisible, whether within conversations around mass incarceration or among dominant narratives surrounding violence toward API communities.

Arriving: Freedom Writings by Asian and Pacific Islanders Behind and Beyond Bars is a carefully assembled collection of poems and personal writing that exposes the migration-to-school-to-prison-to-deportation pipeline. Over thirty courageous voices intimately express the grief, love, and hope that accompany the journey to arriving — in a moment, in a memory, in a home, in yourself. A project of the Asian Prisoner Support Committee, *Arriving* builds on APSC's first groundbreaking anthology, *Other: an Asian & Pacific Islander Prisoners' Anthology*, published in 2007.

"Simultaneously enraging, heartbreaking, and hopeful, *Arriving* challenges us to rethink long-held assumptions about violence, safety and punishment and to understand how colonialism, imperialism, forced migration, and intergenerational trauma undermine safety. *Arriving* pushes us to rethink the perpetual punishment of imprisonment and deportation, and instead, look towards solutions that help heal people and communities."

Victoria Law, author of *"Prisons Make Us Safer" and 20 Other Myths About Mass Incarceration*

"A revelatory mix of personal experiences from people who have survived multiple hardships of intergenerational violence, trauma, the prison industrial complex, and exile from home. *Arriving* is a powerful reminder of war, genocide, migration, and the complexities of the depth and power of healing, transformation, and community. This is an anthology that will draw you back again and again."

Mariame Kaba, author of the Bestselling Book, *Wi Do This 'Til Wi Free Us*

"*Arriving* is a powerful collection of stories told by those whose humanity is so often invisibilized and flattened in our punitive society. Through raw, complex, and expansive narratives, *Arriving* moves us to reckon with the haunting reality of entrapment and trauma inflicted by the US prison industrial complex, while exposing the urgent need for our collective healing and societal transformation. Punctuated by a deep sense of longing and remembering, *Arriving* makes legible generations of violence birthed by war, migration, poverty, and systemic neglect fueled by imperialism, white supremacy, and patriarchy."

Michelle Mijung Kim, Award-Winning author of *The Wake Up: Closing the Gap Between Good Intentions and Real Change*



EAST
WIND
BOOKS

