



Felicia Carbajal

HARM TO HEALING

A Pathway to Abolition

Carceral Studies

Collection Editor
IAN CUMMINS
&
LOUIS MENDOZA

LIVED PLACES
PUBLISHING



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Abstract

Harm to Healing is a powerful memoir and exploration of systemic injustice written by Felicia Carbajal, a Queer, Latinx community organizer and survivor of the drug war and violent crime. The book opens with personal reflections on Carbajal's upbringing in California, where poverty and community resilience shaped their early understanding of justice, identity, and the importance of solidarity across diverse communities. This narrative is interwoven with a deep critique of systemic inequalities, emphasizing how policies like the War on Drugs and mass incarceration disproportionately impact marginalized groups, including BIPOC and LGBTQ+ individuals.

Throughout the book, Carbajal recounts their own experiences of incarceration, delving into the harsh realities of the prison system. They highlight the dehumanizing processes faced by incarcerated individuals, especially those from marginalized backgrounds, while also capturing moments of community-building within carceral spaces. Their reflections shed light on how the carceral system further entrenches social inequities, separating individuals from their communities and hope. The author's story serves as a testament to the resilience and agency of those who survive these oppressive structures, offering a raw, honest portrayal of the emotional and psychological toll of incarceration.

They also emphasize the role of storytelling and activism as tools for healing and community empowerment. They discuss their

transition from being a survivor of harm to becoming an advocate for change, utilizing their lived experiences to support others impacted by criminalization. The book is both a personal journey and a call to action, advocating for a world where justice is rooted in compassion and collective liberation. Ultimately, *Harm to Healing* is an urgent appeal for transformative justice, inviting readers to reimagine a society free from the violence of incarceration, where healing and accountability replace punishment.

Keywords

Abolition

Incarceration

Mutual Aid

Reentry

Systemic Injustice

Trauma-Informed

Storytelling

Resilience

Transformative Justice

Criminalization

LGBTQ+ Advocacy

Intersectionality

Community Empowerment

Healing

Mass Incarceration

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Introduction

I'm Felicia Carbajal, a Queer, Latinx, drug war and violent crime survivor, and a community organizer. My fondest childhood memories involved visiting my grandfather's home in the housing projects in Fresno, California. I loved Tata, his community's diversity, and cook-outs featuring international dishes made with pride, love, and, our common denominator, poverty. At Fresno, I learned the meaning of community, the importance of sharing, and how coming together over food could bridge cultural divides. There, I had friends of all races and nationalities who easily shared what little everyone had as a form of celebration. The first Saturday of the month was always a festive time as it was when most folks got their monthly social safety net checks.

I didn't realize I was poor. I didn't understand how our justice system was affecting people like me or that I would become a statistic, too. Growing up facing intergenerational poverty, broken social safety nets (which never felt safe), and institutions perpetuating violence and harm deepened my desire for equity and fairness. I immersed myself in intersectional struggles, including civil disobedience in the 1990s during the AIDS Crisis, California's marriage equality movement, cannabis legalization, and efforts to end the drug war.

Although there are many of us who, despite growing up in underserved communities, broke the generational cycles of poverty and never saw the insides of institutions, I was not that lucky. My path led me to being incarcerated, while this was far from the trajectory my childhood accomplishments would suggest. The same goes with being harmed and participating in harm—many of us don't necessarily see ourselves in these spaces, but through a series of challenges, we find ourselves there. Incarceration fundamentally separates people from the community—most importantly, the sense of safety in the community—and from hope. I am grateful I never lost hope even in my darkest moments. I knew we deserved to be free and that the harm done to us was wrong.

Today I am privileged to be serving as the Executive Director of the Social Impact Center (TSIC), a Los Angeles based hub for justice-impacted community members. After serving over six years in prison, I am grateful to share my insights and hope for us. This book examines the lived experience of survivors of harm and incarceration while diving into the heart of disinvestment and incarceration as to how our lack of safety is fundamentally linked to racial, gender, and sexual orientation, as well as other forms of inequality. The life I get to explore and question on a daily basis in the community reminds me that I am beyond blessed.

The experiences shared demonstrate how the language of abolition directly answers the lack of safety and insecurity that mass incarceration worsens and offers a way to envision a natural end to this carceral world. The world I dream of! The world I long for. The world my ancestors remind me that is possible. The world I hope you help give life to in community.

1

How It Began

Learning Objectives

1. Understand historical and personal narratives.
2. Examine how firsthand experiences with socioeconomic disparities during childhood influence perceptions of poverty, privilege, and social justice advocacy.
3. Reflect on educational influence.

As a bicentennial baby (1976) born into a Mexican American family whose ancestors have occupied the desert southwest for a millennium, I feel little to no connection to an anniversary year that celebrates all the harms that the founding of the United States has caused and continues to cause. While my birth was a time of celebration for my large Mexican American family (I have 72 first cousins), it was also when the seeds of justice and equality were planted in me. You see, my father was an underemployed factory and farm worker, and my mother was a newly found housewife who had experienced the harms of this world at a very young age, including the foster care system in the 1950s–1960s. I was born into the generational harms of the lasting effects of colonization and displacement of the Mexican people. The fight for healing and justice is rooted in the large, multigenerational, poverty-stricken family I hail from.

While I did not grow up in the housing projects myself, my mother did, and my fondest childhood memories exist in moments spent with my grandfather there. The “Projects” are government-built homes provided to low-income families as part of a social safety net—think giant apartment complexes that often times were neglected. They typically sit in a less desirable neighborhood or area of the town. You apply to be able to live there. This ecosystem, rife with government bureaucracy, was built around housing. While many jobs opened up for the community to support their function, little went into helping the community members uplift themselves from the situation in human-first approaches.

My grandfather had left Texas at a very early age, in his early teens, in search of a better life. He initially moved to Arizona, where he met my grandmother, but ultimately landed in the Central Valley of California. The area that I grew up in, Fresno, is commonly referred to as the breadbasket of the United States. California’s agriculture industry is pivotal in the national and global food supply, as the Central Valley currently account for two-thirds of the fruits and nuts produced. I don’t know those stats from the 1940s to the 1950s, but I imagine they were impressive. My grandparents, who were farm workers, traveled the state seeking opportunities to support their growing family.

At the heart of California’s agricultural success are the migrant farm workers who perform the labor-intensive tasks essential to the industry. Despite their critical role, these workers often face harsh working conditions, low wages, and inadequate labor protections. Many live in poverty, with limited access to healthcare and education, highlighting significant social failings within the industry. Efforts to improve labor conditions, such as advocating

for fair wages, better working environments, and more robust legal protections, are essential for the well-being of these workers as well as the sustainability and ethical integrity of California's agricultural sector. The problems of the past continue to remain the problems of today for many.

All I remember from my Tata is a deep sense of "community," which was necessary for our survival as a people. It was incumbent that we treated everyone we encountered with dignity and respect. While I didn't know I was poor until I was much older, I knew we were different. I knew I could visit my grandfather, fondly known as Tata (a now uncommon name previously used in Northern Mexico for grandpa), and enter a cornucopia of diversity where Mama, my Black grandmother who was raising her grandkids, shared a wall with my Tata and was a surrogate mother to my own mother, whose mom died when she was seven months old. This woman shared love with everyone who stepped into her home. She bought me my first doll, which I cherished deeply because it came from her. This woman shared so much passion through adversity with me and my family. Her grandson made the best ribs I have ever eaten, and today, I pride myself on remembering the mustard that Johnny had always taught me to add.

The first Saturday of the month (after government-issued welfare checks were sent out) was typically a community potluck day. Most if not all residents received government aid for the month, allowing them one celebratory—and often decadent—meal they all chose to share with their neighbors. I remember trying Soul, Vietnamese, Cambodian, Laotian, and Filipino food for the first time at one of the many monthly community cookouts

I could attend. The pride that these people had in their dishes was phenomenal. I fell in love with Lumpia (Filipino egg roll) on one of these Saturdays—I have yet to meet a Lumpia I can't appreciate.

Later, I learned that my Tata marched with Cesar Chavez from Delano to Sacramento in the United Farm Workers' early days. He was a regular face at meetings that addressed the harsh conditions people like him had experienced. He used his and his late wife's story to fight for better conditions for farm workers. The legacy I come from is that of folk who work and fight hard for equity and justice for people experiencing poverty and striving to fulfill America's promises to their families.

520 S. 11th

I was initially brought home to a small apartment two blocks away, and ultimately spent my elementary school years living less than a mile away from the projects.

"My name is Felicia Carbajal. I live at 520 S. 11th" was the beginning of a familiar story my mom would talk about the first time I got lost in a store and what she found me saying to a stranger. All of my experiences in this southeast area of the town propelled me forward. It is incredible what core memories are. I will never forget the address and telephone number of the house I grew up in. It was a duplex that sat at the corner of the block. It had two different addresses for the units and was a place united and filled with love and compassion always.

My journey toward becoming a politicized individual began early, shaped by profound experiences that challenged my

understanding of justice, fairness, and identity. Growing up just a mile from the housing projects in the southeast area of my town, I was exposed to stark disparities in wealth and opportunities from a young age. One of my earliest memories that deeply impacted me was in first grade under the guidance of Mrs. Irene Hara—a teacher who had experienced the Japanese internment during World War II. Her poignant stories about the annual County Fair, held in stables that once housed Japanese Americans, opened my eyes to the injustices of history and sparked a sense of empathy and social consciousness within me.

Mrs. Hara's narrative not only introduced me to the dark corners of American history but also highlighted the resilience of marginalized communities. As a child, I couldn't fully grasp the magnitude of injustice faced by Mrs. Hara's family and others who endured the internment camps. Walking through those same stables where families were stripped of their humanity and housed like animals brought the reality of their suffering vividly to life in my young mind. This early exposure planted seeds of empathy and a burgeoning awareness of systemic inequalities that would continue to grow throughout my life.

I fondly remember Mrs. Hara continuing the trend of folks who influenced my life and understanding of the world. Little did I know that a trip to the annual county fair would awaken me at such an early age. Mrs. Hara, who had experienced Japanese internment in the United States, shared with us as first graders both the excitement of going to the annual county fair and the painful truth about the history of that place—it had housed Japanese Americans in the horse stables. And as a six-year-old,

my mind was blown. I had no idea: not only that this was a part of our history but the fact, which Mrs. Hara shared, that my teacher's father, who was a dentist, and his whole family had to pack up their homes to go live in the stables as they waited to be shipped across the country. A dentist! An admirable profession and yet this is how he was treated—this struck me deeply indeed.

Mrs. Hara recollected that when they finally returned to the only home she had known in Fresno, it was in poor condition, and everything they had built with the business was gone. As a six-year-old traveling to that fair and walking through the stables to see animals, I cried because I envisioned myself being forced to live in horse stables with my family stripped of their entire dignity, and it shook me. It took a lot of comforting for this overly emotional child to calm down, including having my mom come and meet us so I could continue my fair experience.

And, of course, it was not lost on me that the government would build these social safety nets, "The Projects"—the housing projects on the next block—behind this very area that had brought so much shame to the city I grew up in. While many of us experience different poverty levels, I could recognize within my understanding that there were layers within these. I wasn't as *poor* as some of my other family members. I was better off than other people who didn't have new shoes or new clothes or didn't have access to some of the basic things that I had. This made me think I wasn't poor. It wasn't until I was an adult that I understood the failings of this country, not just for myself, but for the generations of my family that have existed in the desert southwest for generations, because while I share that I'm a fourth-generation

Mexican American, my family and my ancestors have been on this land for millennia.

I'm often asked how I became so politicized and whether incarceration influenced my views. I usually tell people my views, and being politicized came before imprisonment. I had the privilege of attending a magnet computer and science high school with people from across the county who were multiracial, with varying gender expressions, and came from working-class backgrounds. So, of course, the memories from the first grade with Mrs. Hara forced me to challenge my ideas about justice and fairness. My upbringing included interactions with medical professionals as they hosted free clinics, churches, and community centers, combined with waiting in line for free food and then having it all shift and change rapidly as I became a teenager. It was then I could understand the economic disparity, poverty levels, what makes an individual poor, as well as what pushes families into intergenerational poverty that denies them opportunities to expand their horizons or understand something different.

And, of course, my first year of high school wholly shaped that angst that was boiling in me that I didn't know what to do with. At the time, during an assembly to celebrate Christopher Columbus Day, the school invited a local nonprofit organization, a community-based group nearby, to address the students. Members of this group came in and started telling us the truth about Christopher Columbus. What he had done to Indigenous people, not just the colonization but the harm and the destruction that came with him and the individuals who traveled with him, gave me a whole new context. It made me question, along

with many of my classmates, what was going on politically and what that looked like. We had been lied to for a long time, and this just further awakened me.

I am a kid who grew up benefiting from certain social safety nets, like summer lunch programs and summer activities that fed me and taught me skills. In addition, having significant amounts of privilege, I was going to this magnet school and being introduced to computer science before it was what it is today. Encouraged to think outside of what my family had known or been educated about really allowed me to grow and be the politicized person that I am. I'd also like to think that being on the debate team with a diverse group of people who discussed the failings of our society—from homelessness in the 1980s, which was centered on deinstitutionalization, to figuring out nuclear solutions, to healing our environment—I was wide awake at a very young age, before incarceration, about what fails us.

And last but not least, I knew I was queer at a very young age and fought hard to be accepted in this world—from having a new identity that was also marginalized to growing up seeing the literal hate to people watching MTV's *The Real World* with Pedro Zamora, an openly gay man who shared his struggle with HIV and AIDS, to just wanting to be accepted for who I was. Despite growing up in a fundamentalist Christian home that told me my sheer existence was a sin, these are the types of things that force folks not only to think outside of the box but to be unafraid and unwilling to compromise when it comes to how other people treat you, how you're respected, and where your dignity lies in as a person.

From being a six-year-old first-grader introduced to the suffering of somebody I cared about and respected as an educator, to gaining a deeper insight into what poverty looked like for poor, Black and Brown people, and immigrants, to having that awakening about the founding of this nation, to discovering my identity as a queer, and fighting to be accepted as someone different yet sharing the same core values as others in that time, I'm grateful that I was politicized and that this awakening reached me so early in life so that I could question everything which I did, which wasn't always the best or brightest move but it was my move nonetheless. My convictions wouldn't allow me to be silent about wrong things and adjust.

2

Gun Violence, A Night's Impact

Learning Objectives

1. Understand how intersecting identities shape the experiences of gun violence survivors.
2. Identify systemic flaws in the criminal justice system that hinder justice for marginalized communities.
3. Recognize the importance of community support in healing and empowering survivors of violent crimes.

Pain and suffering are always inevitable for a large intelligence and a deep heart.

—Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *Crime and Punishment*

To truly understand the impact of gun violence, one must delve into the lived experiences of survivors. The aftermath is not confined to physical wounds but extends to the intricate web of emotional, psychological, and societal repercussions. The scars of that fateful night stand as a testament to my personal resilience and as a mirror reflecting the urgent need for systemic change.

Like many Latinos, I grew up in the barrio. I was raised less than a mile from my mother's home in the east side's housing projects. I didn't know it was a rough neighborhood. Like most kids,

I was ordered back into my home when the streetlights came on at night. We had a yard filled with lemon and orange trees, a decent-sized garden, a swing set, and grapes. My maternal grandparents, both born in Texas, had moved to California to chase their dreams. I doubt they dreamed of farm labor, but that is what they did with pride.

I loved riding my bike in the neighborhood but often tried to avoid the alley behind my house. I feared it. Adults told us stories of crime, oftentimes in Spanish (which I did not speak as a child), as if they were shielding us kids from reality to the cars that raced down the alley with reckless abandon, and I was scared of it! Folks who emerged from this place on foot were foreign to me and always looked like they were up to no good. Feared it is more accurate!

It was a day like any other day. I woke up excited for summer break, made my bed, had cereal, and out of nowhere the impact of gun violence struck my young existence. On this day my friend Emilio, who was my neighbor's son, was shot while walking down this alley—a shortcut teenagers often took. I am unsure as to whether I heard the shot itself, or perhaps I did—it possibly sounded like a car backfiring or some other loud sound that radiated from the barrio, and this threw me off. I heard his screams. To this day, I will never forget him or the amount of blood there was. I immediately ran to tell my mother that Emilio, who was in the alley outside our garage, was shot. I don't think she believed me when I first said it until I pulled at her to see.

She immediately sent me to alert his mother to what had just happened. I will never forget what I saw next. His mother, Joanne,

picked up her almost 15-year-old with herculean strength and ran down the street to the next block where our county hospital sat. Blood fell on the sidewalk all the way down the block. Had Joanne not run down the street—and I do mean a city block—he would not have made it. Ambulances rarely serviced our community, and together with the amount of blood I saw, I am sure he would have bled out. Now don't get me wrong. We often saw and heard ambulances speeding past our block to the hospital, but I do not recall any every being called to help my neighbors.

Emilio healed, but that day, I became keenly aware that my neighborhood wasn't safe. They never caught the person who did this to him. The police did eventually show up, and they treated us all like suspects, including my eight-year-old self. That was the day I learned to fear the police. And while I would have more events like this happen throughout my young life, this one hit home especially hard as Emilio and his older sister Alice often babysat me and my sister. We all grew up together. They were already living in the unit when we moved in, and their whole family welcomed us with open arms. Emilio was a trusted member of our extended family which was a hard thing to achieve.

Emilio was the older brother I never had, and he was just right on the other side of the wall in our duplex. If I looked out my window, I could see him practicing his pitch during baseball season. He loved baseball and had played as long as I can remember. He was good. Although he was older than me, he was my friend. I remember him at my fifth birthday busting my pinata and making sure us little kids got candy. He was kind and thoughtful. And while he did not die, he could have and that changed me.

Cannabis for Queers

In the early fall of 1994, the vibrant tapestry of San Francisco's Bay Area became the backdrop for my life. I had moved up there to attend college, and while most days I did, I relished in my newfound freedom and being able to love who I loved. I will never forget the first time I held a woman's hand in public. As I walked up University Boulevard holding her hand, I felt on top of the world. I did not grow up in a home that accepted what folks referred to as a "lifestyle." In fact, I grew up having attended the California church where Prop 8 would be born over a decade later.

Like many people, I relished my newfound freedoms. From late nights by the marina to all the raves and, of course, being a companion to my friends dying of AIDS. Oh, and let's not forget the culturally diversity that lit my heart on fire. I loved learning about other community's traditions and what they value. It was easy for me to see our intersectional needs, wants, and desires. Of course, like most of my life, I had to find places and spaces to be of service. Oakland had a radical history that I benefitted from, and I was eager to pay my homage and be of service. Oakland during that time felt like it was in perpetual punishment from the radical history of the Black Panthers. There were so many people with broken spirits, and the economic divide was painfully real. I could drive down Telegraph or San Pablo Boulevard and easily notice it.

One fateful afternoon while sitting in an apartment I shared with two friends from my hometown, a familiar face stopped by on their way to the city. We had a casual conversation about the weather, and I shared I was heading to the city to visit with a mutual friend. The delight in their eyes when I said that was a

little uncomfortable for me as I knew something was up. They shared that they didn't have time to drop off something to our mutual friend and his roommate, and asked whether I could do it. That something happened to be a kilo of cannabis. You could imagine my shock at this request.

I was a hard *no way* until he shared with me that it was for my friend Kevin who I was scheduled to visit in an hour. At the time, Kevin had not shared his diagnosis with me. So, with a sense of urgency, I picked up the sack of weed and put in my Jansport backpack, holding onto the words of the friend who had asked for a favor, saying I looked white enough to go unbothered by law enforcement. The thoughts that raced through my head had nothing to do with whether this was right or wrong or if the cops were going to get me. Rather they were centered on the fact that my friend was going to most likely die, and he hadn't told me. Did he not trust me enough to share this news? Who was going to take care of him? I just wanted to hug him and tell him he wasn't alone and that I was here for him.

As I got off the BART (Bay Area Rapid Transit) and made my way to the street, the friend who said I looked white enough was right. Despite all the cops in the subway, not one of the stopped me or even looked my way. I made my way up the hill to Kevin's apartment that he shared with three other friends, all of whom had been kicked out of their homes from across the country because they were queer. While they were so creative and talented, their medical status combined with where we were as world relegated them to sex work. As I got closer to their apartment, I cried as I thought about what I would say.

When Kevin opened the door, he wasn't surprised to see me as I was expected that day; however, he was curious as to why I was there a little early. I opened my backpack, whipped out the giant sack of weed, and just hugged him. We cried for a while just holding each other like old friends do, even though we had known one another for less than six months. We spent the rest of the day focusing not on death but on life. We laughed and joked about how I, of all people—the good church girl who was afraid to jaywalk—had brought the weed into the city and broken the law. As I got ready to leave, one of the roommates pointed to money on the table and reminded me to take it. As I left, I grabbed the envelope and asked them who I should give this to. They laughed and teased me, by calling me church girl, and told me it was mine. The amount was more than what I made in a whole week at my internship.

Cannabis access during that time is not what it is today. As the epidemic ravaged LGBTQ+ populations, particularly gay men and transgender individuals, the lack of government response and the stigmatization of those affected highlighted deep-seated inequalities. The crisis exposed how systemic discrimination within the healthcare system and the broader society denied LGBTQ+ individuals essential medical care, resources, and support. Activism during this period, led by groups such as ACT UP, drew attention to the ways in which the criminalization of LGBTQ+ identities, through laws and social stigmas, compounded the community's vulnerability. This resulted in groups such as the Marijuana Buyer's Club being formed in the heart of San Francisco's Castro district. This activism not only fought for access to life-saving treatments but also challenged the criminal

justice system's role in perpetuating violence and exclusion against LGBTQ+ people, thereby sparking broader debates about civil rights and social justice that continue to resonate today.

While the majority of my free time was devoted to supporting my siblings who were HIV positive or had AIDS, there were, on occasion, other much more financially lucrative opportunities to participate in this underground medical marijuana market. My heart and my commitment were to my friends with limited resources and access that would embarrass people in the cannabis market today. While the public face of compassionate cannabis was white, its redheaded step-sibling was filled with poorer people from all walks of life and all colors of the rainbow.

It was during this time that I began exploring ways to increase my contribution not only to my sick friends but to myself. I was no longer the naive person who had no idea I was getting paid to transport cannabis from point A to point B to help my friends. I now had access to large amounts of the product that I could sell outside of my community and still support my friends with free access. I made friends for life from this time. Those who lived and those I still get to honor today include the late Dennis Peron, a gay man who refused to see his partner die without dignity, and to him I am forever grateful.

Oakland: The Town

For a short time, I lived with one of my uncles and his wife. My mom's brother, Tio Jack, worked as a chef at UC Berkeley, while my aunt Julia was a nurse at Alta Bates Hospital. They were much older than my parents but provided me with enough freedom,

guidance, and love to feel safe in the new space I occupied in the lower bottoms of West Oakland. They were the first to take me to a bar. As I was underage, they did not allow me to drink, but there was a Raider's game any my uncle had cooked some Pozole. Today that neighborhood is incredibly gentrified. Hell, the bodega on the corner sells my bougie overpriced Coconut Water from Thailand that I can't live without. But back then I was one of the whitest faces, and you could see the poverty all around the area despite my family being working middle class.

It wasn't until a musical artist from the group Tony! Toni! Toné! moved back into the neighborhood filled with Victorians that change could be seen. That was around the time I lived there. The block parties that were hosted during my first few months of living there were incredible. From the food to the music, it felt just like the monthly celebrations I had with my Tata in the housing projects but on steroids. Two and a half years spent navigating the streets of Oakland and experiencing the beauty of the region had opened my eyes to a world of transformation. It was a period marked by personal discovery—an unearthing of my identity outside the confines of my conservative Christian parents' home. Love, friendships, and a radical awakening inspired by the legacy of the Black Panthers defined this phase of my life.

Most of my love for "The Town," as it is commonly known, ended when an incident that would irreversibly alter the course of my life happened. Yet, amid the kaleidoscope of cultural richness, the mid-1990s in California presented a battleground for communities like mine. The era witnessed the implementation of the Crime Bill, the ominous Three Strikes law, a widening wealth gap, and the unsettling presence of the Ku Klux Klan at my first pride