

PRODUCTIVITY IS FREEDOM

TEXT BY
ANAIS FREITAS ELESURU

I tried, for the longest time, to talk about the prison with foreign eyes—to describe it as something isolated, detached from what constituted my reality. I'm a 25 year-old bilingual New York educated Peruvian woman that has never been imprisoned. I'm free. Free to work, although this feels like an oxymoron at times. I work as a designer in one of Peru's largest banks. The visit to the Lurigancho prison was a way to explore the unknown.

Walking into Lurigancho, at first, made me feel like I was in danger. The moment Carlos, I and two guards crossed the hallway to find many inmates staring at me as we walked by felt menacing, or scary. I thought about the risks, the same risks that govern me every time I call an Uber late at night on my own, or the times I have switched lanes on the sidewalk because someone looked suspicious. "You are going to feel safer inside the prison than you do outside," Saraí, our guide, mentioned on our way there. I instinctively didn't believe her.

Until I did. Switching from the hallway to the prison chapel, the fear quickly evaporated. We met the people in charge of getting inmates back on their feet—most of them foreigners, obviously. The cliché of the altruistic person that travelled miles and miles and settled at a place that doesn't even speak their language or have any appreciation for what they do. We tend to forget prisons have a staff, let alone one full of Germans, French and Americans. "No one is formally a psychologist here," Anna mentioned. "Informally, however we are all psychologists." She is closer to ninety than her skin can prove and she definitely has no plans of going back to Wisconsin.

But what struck me the most of the way Lurigancho was organized was the area where inmates were allowed to produce. Just like me and my designer job at a big bank. On our way to the workshops, Saraí narrated the story of *El Gitano*, The Gypsy, a good-looking young man that had been in Lurigancho for being a petty thief. He was talented and would make handbags in one of the workshops. Later, his mom would sell them in the outside world, making good money out of them. After five years, *El Gitano* was released for good behaviour. It was a compelling story, I was curious.

El Gitano quickly realized he was not able to be as productive outside of Lurigancho as he had been inside. He didn't have the means. It was impossible to afford the machinery he had been lent at the prison, the costs of the materials, the access to light, etc. He quickly realized it was going to be more profitable to produce inside it and so, robbed on purpose so he could be locked-up again. He succeeded.

As Saraí spoke, I thought of my own entrepreneurial ventures—everything I had tried to do on the side before I finally settled for the “real” job. Selling clothes, launching a digital magazine, producing installations, parties. I thought about all the money I made and lost and the dreams in between. I thought about my current job, my addiction to the adrenaline of getting a task done. The threat of boredom and the seductive energy behind productivity—a desire that felt more and more universal as I navigated the prison workshops and saw the bread, the clothes and the crafts.

Saraí later narrated how *El Gitano* was locked-up again, only to die in a riot inside the prison three weeks later. His legacy prevails and now, most of the prison space is taken up by workshops where inmates can develop a specific product to later sell to the outside world. These inmates are locked-up, yes, but they are also exercising one of the most capitalist values of the free world: making, selling, profiting. Just like me.

Carlos and I navigated the workshop, the bakery, the rest of the stations. It was frankly astonishing to see many of the inmates producing for big companies outside the prison in what looked like better conditions than the sweatshops in the outside world. And then it hit me. Why are children in Bangladesh working in worse conditions than middle-aged Peruvians in jail? *El Gitano* had traded productivity for freedom, placing his life as the opportunity cost.

Suddenly, this idea that a prison is foreign to my reality, to our reality as a society even, sounded fake. The parallel was obvious. We live in prisons of our own, most of the time. And when we are not, we mistake safety for comfort. *El Gitano*, just like me, had settled for the real job.

Written for Carlos Jaramillo's exhibit
"Beyond Bars", in the Gallery at W83 from
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The Gallery at W83 Ministry Center is a
space, on the Upper West Side of Manhattan,
where art cultivates community and engages
conversations for the spiritual, social, and
cultural renewal of New York City and beyond.