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Blue Lines, Steel, and the Hour of Myth

Women in prison transcend violence, tedium, and the past

By Celeste Fraser Delgado

When the dancers walk to class on Sunday afternoons, they are careful to follow the bright blue lines painted on the ground. In prison, walking outside boundaries can net a warning, a writeup, or even land an inmate in lock -- close confinement for as many as 30 days. Maggie Carr gets off easy when she cuts across the sidewalk toward the old Visiting Park, a big empty room set aside for family time but now used for inmate dance class. "Excuse me," the glowering guard growls, and sends Carr back the way she came.

This time Carr stays between the contours. Her shapeless shirt and pants don't conceal the 40-year-old Colombian American's graceful carriage. She circles the long way around the wooden gazebo, where women in dull blue cotton shifts soak up the last rays of sun before being recalled to the dorms for the night. She passes the pill line where inmates slouch, waiting for Zyprexa or Prozac. Finally she sees her brilliant black hair, smoothed into two thick braids anchored behind her ears, reflected in the glass double doors to the old VP. When she smiles, the decade she has served of her life sentence barely creases her freckled face.

Around the perimeter of the Homestead Correctional Institution there are double rows of tall electric fences festooned with jagged loops of razor wire. Inside the state prison the blue lines lead some 700 women inmates through an elaborate routine from cell to cafeteria to work duty to chapel and canteen. Perhaps the ritual repetition of these steps, the Byzantine, isolated culture of jailhouse life, suggested to Carr the Greek myth of the labyrinth as a theme for the class she leads along with an instructor from Inside Out, a prison arts program run by Florida-based nonprofit Artspring. It is not much of a stretch for Carr, or anyone else inside, to identify with the doomed Minotaur. Like that monster born of the unholy union of woman and beast, then imprisoned inside an insoluble maze, each inmate has traveled her own tragic path into wires and lines.

"We all have a story," says Carr. She's been hearing those stories from other inmates in Inside Out classes for the past six years, ever since she joined the program founded by choreographer and Florida International University dance professor Leslie Neal in 1994. With Neal's help, Carr translated the curriculum last year for Spanish-speaking inmates. Now a dozen or so Latinas, whose crimes range from money laundering and drug dealing to murder, come together for two hours every week to dance, sing, act, and draw out feelings locked away long ago. "Whether we're abused or our mother drank or we're alcoholic or drug addicts," Carr explains, "whatever the reason for the physical crime, each woman is in prison because of a story."

The god Poseidon gave King Minos a White Bull for the king to sacrifice as an offering to the god. As the outside world tunes out Muzak carols in December, Yessenia Suarez, ensconced in a six-by-nine-foot cell with blackout windows, tries to hear the chorus telling the tale of the Minotaur in her head. "Your mind rushes 1000 miles an hour [in confinement]," she says. "You can imagine real far." Suarez knows that this Sunday afternoon the Inside Out presentation is going on without her. She can imagine the rows of folding chairs in the old VP filling up with her fellow inmates. The dancers take their places.

The 23-year-old Cuban American was supposed to play the White Bull, but two weeks before the presentation she wandered out of bounds and ended up in lock. Broad-

Jonathan Postal



Jonathan Postal



From the top: Yaneth Gomez takes wing; Gloria Baez reflects on her life; prison poet

shouldered and nearly five feet nine, Suarez giggled like a little girl during rehearsals. She jabbed at the red cape flashed before her, holding crooked fingers at her temples like horns. She would linger after class, eager to talk more about the mythic themes of betrayal and sacrifice mirrored in her own life.

Class reminded Suarez of the fun she had with her cousins, practicing elaborate dance numbers for her big family's endless quinceañeras. Suarez was raised by her grandparents after her parents were killed in a car crash on her fourth birthday. She was doted on by uncles and aunts. "But that was never enough," the orphan admits. As a teenager she would run away from home to spend time with friends of whom her strict grandparents did not approve.

One night sixteen-year-old Suarez snuck a hungry fourteen-year-old homeless girl into the house. The girl told her they had to "go on a mission" to pick up a boyfriend. Suarez didn't know that the couple had a criminal routine: The teen would seduce older men and then let the boyfriend and his buddy in to rob. This time the victim resisted; he was killed. The "mission" made Suarez an accessory to murder.

Sitting in lock Suarez remembers her sacrificial role. By refusing to testify against her, Suarez spared the younger girl a life sentence, but in doing so lost a plea deal that would have reduced her own time by a third. Suarez learned that there are no friends in jail. When her co-defendant ended up in the same state prison, Suarez's loyalty meant nothing. "She's nice when she needs something from me," Suarez says. "[Otherwise] the girl backstabs me." What a relief it had been to turn her unappreciated gift into a dance. "My part was perfect for me," she sighs after getting out of lock. "All my life, my friends messed me over."

King Minos decides to keep the White Bull for himself and sacrifices an ordinary bull to Poseidon instead. A few minutes after 3:00 p.m. two guards organize the audience for head count. Each guard individually counts the inmates lined up along the hallway to the old VP, and then counts again, until they both agree on a number: "66."

Against the opposite wall, between a bright red Coke machine and a card table holding a pile of handmade props, the guards count the performers; all dressed in blue pants with white stripes up the legs and prison-issue white cotton undershirts. "Ten," the guards agree.

Ten of seventeen women who initially signed up for the thirteen-week session managed to make it through to the December 2003 presentation without dropping out, getting locked down, getting shipped to another prison, or in one glorious case, being sent home. The group lost the first Minotaur to lock. Then after weeks of rehearsal her replacement backed out only hours before the show. To fill in for the Minotaur and the White Bull, the chorus was stripped of two of its most energetic members. Luz Reyes, one of four women remaining in the depleted chorus and an eternal if enthusiastic follower, found herself a leader by default.

"Oh my God, I never had no responsibility," Reyes admits. "I haven't taken care of my daughters for years. Even when they were babies, they used to fall off the bed." The 31-year-old Puerto Rican's story is typical of many heard inside: alcoholic and abusive parents; caregiver for younger siblings; and solace found in drinking, drugs, and the attention of men, no matter how abusive. Reyes made her living as an exotic dancer, snorting cocaine for the courage to get onstage. Late one night she accepted a ride from a man outside the club. She says he tried to rape and strangle her. Reyes stabbed him to death, and was convicted of manslaughter.

Terrified, Reyes stands at the front of the chorus. The three women behind her forget gestures they have rehearsed for weeks. They stand silent, frozen in place. Reyes perseveres. The bold chopping motion that accompanied the syllables of Mi-mi-mi-mi-nos is

Evelyn Chapman; Maggie Carr with her mentor, Artspring founder Leslie Neal
Jonathan Postal

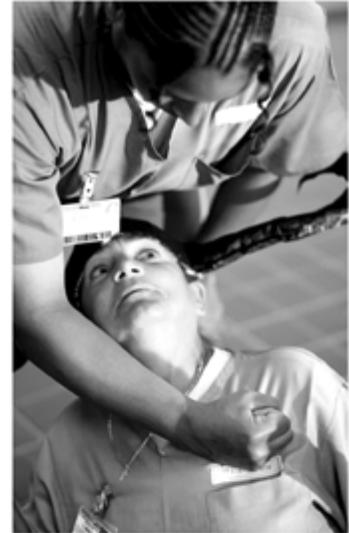


Maggie Carr and Gloria Baez see themselves in each other; Margarita Cantin (top) feels the Minotaur in her flesh
Jonathan Postal

reduced to a finger flutter. The boisterous hiss of Po-sssssei-don is now a suppressed sigh. But Reyes doesn't give up. Slowly the rest of the chorus catches her courage.

It's hard enough to dance in class; moving the body revives so many feelings the women have forced themselves to forget. "Things become a little emotional and they give up," Carr observes of the dropout rate over the years. "I always ask myself: *Why do they give up so easy?*" For the women who stick it out, class offers sanctuary. "There's so much hustle here -- the lies, the drugs, the prison games," she continues. "When you come to the group you bring your walls down. There's no messing up. You can just be."

Prison regulations don't allow for family members or friends to sit in the audience. Instead the dancers perform for fellow inmates, a daunting proposition. "The people out there [on the compound] are ruthless. You don't want to show any weakness because they'll use it against you," Carr points out. "I know a lot of them laugh at us. They get back and say shit. But inside they're saying: *I wish I had the courage to do that.*"



*As punishment Poseidon casts a spell on Minos's wife Queen Pasiphaë to make her fall in love with the White Bull. Pasiphaë convinces the king's architect Daedalus to make her a cow costume so she can seduce the White Bull. A Latin pop song pours out of a portable sound system, advising listeners to *Look at the essence/not the appearance.* Carr, playing Pasiphaë, swirls an enormous red cape made out of paper in front of the White Bull.*

When the song ends, narrator Evelyn Chapman strides across the floor, reciting an original poem. The inmates in the front row egg her on. Some envy the 23-year-old her beauty; others are thrilled by her enormous eyes, smooth café-au-lait skin, and slim figure. In prison since she was sixteen, the striking Chapman is used to causing a stir. *When I walk up in a room/I glow like the moon/I shine like the sun,* she declares. She warns her detractors: *Your critical glances and negative phrases/Try to dim my glow/But it won't work.*



Natasha Rivera (top) slays her fears; Maggie Carr (bottom) is a leader

Chapman, who came to Miami from the Dominican Republic as a toddler, learned about the fusion of love and hate from her mother. Chapman was beaten for not doing a good enough job cooking, cleaning, or caring for younger siblings born to a series of fathers. The little girl would comfort the adult when her mother was abandoned by yet another man. By the time she was thirteen, Chapman says, she was tired of being the family "rescuer." She found herself hooking up with boyfriends who introduced her to drugs and dealing. *A toke of pot, a snort of cocaine,* she chants. *And the confusion and emptiness magically went away.* Chapman stops pacing and snaps: *I was lost in the maze.*

The poet's delivery is inflamed by a recent rift with her family. "They disowned me and I disowned them," she says. She imagines that she is reciting the poem directly to her mother. *So go ahead, gaze/And hate,* she dares, hands on her hips, right thigh hitched. *You too live in a maze/I just hope you find the right way.*

From the love of the White Bull and Pasiphaë, the Minotaur is born. Minos commands Daedalus to build a labyrinth to imprison the Minotaur. Margarita Cantin emerges from behind Carr's red cape. Wiry and five feet two, the 52-year-old from Santiago, Cuba, hardly has the physique of a monster, but the expression on her face is so fierce beneath her black paper horns that her size hardly matters. When she strides center stage and falls to one knee with her arms outstretched, the Minotaur is monstrous.

That same awesome presence made Cantin a legend in the Miami underworld of the late Seventies and early Eighties. The petite go-go dancer used to collect \$2000 to \$3000 a night in her garter belts and discovered she had a head for business. Marijuana was still an import crop then, and somebody had to move it. Later came cocaine and other opportunities. She made a name as a shrewd crime boss.

An injured party sought vengeance, putting Cantin's children at risk. The scrappy exile shot her enemy dead in the street. In a highly publicized police chase in 1983, Cantin jumped from a bridge and was shot six times before she was subdued. She served ten years in the federal pen, didn't see her daughter for twenty. Devastated and destitute after her release, she discovered crack. Mired in

petty crime, she was hauled in for auto theft six years ago and sentenced to fifteen years.

"My life has always been a labyrinth," says Cantin. "My brother tries to rape me. My husband cheats on me. My mother kills herself. Even my own family betrayed me. I couldn't trust my own lawyer. That's what my life has been, a labyrinth. From the beginning I wanted to be the Minotaur."

An unannounced understudy, Cantin watched the Minotaur in every rehearsal, learning the choreography. At night, in her bunk, she prayed to God to give her the role. Then, inexplicably, the day of the presentation, the veteran dancer who had been practicing the part backed out. Cantin was ready. "They didn't have to teach me anything," she boasts. Crouched at the center of a widening spiral of white paper plates laid out to suggest the maze, Cantin lowers her head and swivels the horns, bull-like, from side to side.

"Everything comes from your situation," she explains. "If you don't know it, you can't do it. It's in your flesh." Cantin knows the Minotaur. "He didn't ask to be brought into this world," she points out. "How is he to blame for turning out the way he did?"

Every seven years seven virgins are sacrificed to the Minotaur. One year a handsome young virgin named Theseus arrives who determines to kill the beast. Ariadne, the daughter of Minos, falls in love with the hero. To help him, Ariadne goes to Daedalus, who gives her a ball of yarn for Theseus to carry into the labyrinth so he can find his way out.

Gloria Baez stands at the edge of the first row of inmates, her eyes scanning above the crowd as though she is looking at a horizon far beyond the bleakness of the prison. She wears prison blues and made due with a limited makeup palette -- a single extra lipstick or blush is considered contraband -- yet her face is as dramatically shadowed as if she were wearing an evening gown.

To a lilting guitar arpeggio from the sound system, the 35-year-old Puerto Rican reaches daintily in front of her as though she is picking up long pieces of string. Fluid as a ballerina, Baez wraps the imaginary string around her wrists, her arms, her belly, her neck. Her lips parted in an enigmatic smile, she looks down toward an imaginary basket that holds all that is precious about her. She wraps herself in these gifts, closing her eyes, tilting her head, and arching her back. She appears to be utterly alone in a private ecstasy.

When Baez was a little girl, she had what she calls a "safe place" between her dresser and her bedroom wall where she would hide when her mother and father fought. "A tiny little hole for tiny me," she recalls. "There in my hole I cried, talked to myself, and dreamed of being an actress and a singer." Her mother, married at fourteen to a much older man who punched and pummeled her, used to beat her children in turn. After a family friend molested five-year-old Baez, she believed him when he warned her not to tell her parents or her mother would beat her. Besides, she says of the man's groping, "It felt good. I was used to it."

Then the familiar prison story: cigarettes, weed, coke, unprotected sex. Miscarriage at fourteen. Runaway at sixteen. Inured to pain, she pierced her own ears and burnt a cross into her shoulder. Baby at eighteen. Stripping. Drug deals.

Behind Gloria, Theseus enters the labyrinth carrying a ball of imaginary string. The rhythm of the song shifts. *Even though I get lost/I love the pain*, the singer confesses. Baez lurches forward, and then jerks backward. She spins violently as though she is unraveling.

In a battle inside the labyrinth, Theseus kills the Minotaur. Natasha Rivera lunges forward, in slow motion. Cantin is still there, at the center of the labyrinth on her knees. Nearly six inches taller than her nemesis, Rivera bobs, crouches, and crawls, tracing out the labyrinth's path by keeping her feet in a heel-to-toe line, as though she is dancing on a tightrope.

In New York City, when she was making mad money, Rivera frequented dance clubs; now there is a subtle dance-floor funk to her twists and turns. At age 22, Rivera's been on her own for twelve years. Her mother died when Rivera was six. Four years later, she was kicked out of her grandmother's house, pregnant with her uncle's child. "My family chose him over me," Rivera remembers bitterly. "I had to go from guy's house to guy's house, because I had no place to live." Rivera bore a daughter who died before turning two.

Before she was a teenager, Rivera was making a living on the street. One afternoon when she was in high school, already tall and over 200 pounds, she snapped. She spotted the uncle who had raped her, threw him to the ground, and was kicking him savagely in the head before she could be pulled away.

As Rivera circles closer to Cantin, the boom box emits a tortured howl. Rivera cups her hand to her ear and walks on tiptoe, looking cautiously over her shoulder. She crouches close to the ground and swipes her hand across the brown tiles of the old VP. Cantin, as frightened as she is fearsome, turns in circles, telegraphing danger.

Rivera made enough as a dealer to provide for the family that rejected her. "I didn't use drugs," Rivera insists. "My thing was making money and taking care of my family. I wanted to buy their love." Now that she's almost completed a sentence for trafficking, she's wary about seeing her family again. "Where was that love when I was a kid?" she asks. "Where was that love when all I had to give was love?"

Cymbals crash. Cantin leaps up in surprise. Rivera recoils, then thrusts an imaginary dagger in the Minotaur's heart. Cantin moans. Rivera stabs her again: in the stomach, in the back, at least a dozen times. On her knees, Cantin pounds her chest, and croaks sadly, "I am the Minotaur." She falls on her back, arms outstretched below her horns. Rivera hulks over the body.

King Minos orders the arrest of Daedalus and his son Icarus. Daedalus and Icarus build wings out of wax and feathers so they can escape. A plaintive violin introduces a clip-clop beat. Yaneth Gomez swishes her hips and shifts her weight from toe to heel, dancing a cumbia. Her face slightly inclined, she stretches out her arms as though she is flying.

The 47-year-old is "deportable." In five years, when she finishes her twelve-year sentence, she'll be sent back to Colombia without seeing more of the United States than the prison, the courthouse, and the airport gate where she was detained.

Therese Miller walks behind Gomez, Icarus to her Daedalus. While Gomez cumbias in place, Miller measures her arm span once, two times, then picks up a set of white paper wings made earlier in the week in the prison chapel. As Miller slides the wings over Gomez's arms and head, the Colombian amuses the audience by twisting her body awkwardly and contorting her face in mock surprise. Flapping her wings and swishing her hips, Gomez swoops in a wide circle. She slides in front of the first row, tickling the audience with her paper feathers.

Unlike most women in prison, Gomez had a happy childhood followed by a good marriage to a man who treated her well. The couple raised three children while running a furniture store in Bogotá. Then her husband's health began to fail. The business went bankrupt; bills mounted. Gomez was barely keeping up with a factory job, when she learned that her husband would need open-heart surgery. A co-worker put her in touch with some people who could solve all her problems with a quick trip to Miami.

"I was determined to do something to get us out of this chaos," she explains. "This trafficking job seemed like the easiest and fastest way." Gomez left Bogotá at 7:00 a.m. on a Tuesday in April 1997. By 11:00 a.m. she was charged with trafficking and possession of 250 grams of heroin. "I was the only person on the flight [customs] stopped," she says, shaking her head. She didn't know anything about the people who hired her; wouldn't have made a deal anyway. "There were phone calls to my house," she explains.

"Daedalus managed to fly, but his wings melted," Gomez points out in the inmates' version of the myth. "That's what happened to me. I fell so low and it was so hard that when I got up I couldn't fly. Instead I walked slowly and cautiously. When I return to my country and my family, it will be in serenity and peace because here I learned patience."

Pumping her arms faster now, Gomez bends her knees. Her body sinks low. The chorus runs out to the floor to catch her. Holding her beneath her shoulders and her knees, four women bear her away.

Theseus escapes with Ariadne in a boat, then abandons her on an island. She wakes up alone on the shore. Gloria Baez, as Ariadne, lies down in the center of the floor, eyes closed, legs curled, one hand tucked beneath her cheek, the other stretched above her head. To the sweet sound of an Andean flute, Carr, playing Ariadne's mother Pasiphaë, follows Baez and lies down behind her in the same position. In unison, the pair pushes up as though awakening from a deep sleep. Mirror images of each other, the two women spin in slow circles on the floor.

In prison Baez faced her greatest fear: solitude. A beautiful woman, she realized that she "jumped from man to man" because she was afraid she couldn't make it on her own. Terror gripped her when she left her mother in Puerto Rico to go to Miami. "I wanted her to *not* let me go," she remembers. Despite the beatings and the sexual abuse her mother did not prevent, Baez insists, "She wasn't a bad mother. She was abused too, in a way."

The women break the mirror and dance away from each other, each inventing her own steps. Then Baez returns to Carr, who takes the younger woman in her arms. Baez sinks to her knees, but Carr lifts her up and hugs her, face to face.

Carr is a mother figure to many of the inmates in her class as well as to her other "prison daughters" on the compound. "They have expectations," says Carr. "They think I have all the answers."

After a decade of hearing women rationalize their crimes, throwing the blame for what they've done on everyone but themselves, Carr has decided she needs to accept responsibility for her part in taking a life. "I always told myself that I just did the paper stuff," acknowledges the former bookkeeper, who helped swindle a British businessman out of a million dollars and set him up for murder. "But now I realize that whoever does that is just as responsible as the person who pulls the trigger."

As a violin crescendos, Carr and Baez circle each other. They spin across the room searching for someone they don't see. They reach toward each other, but their hands don't touch. Finally, as the music slows, they come to rest in each other's arms.

The god Dionysus finds Ariadne, falls in love with her, and gives her a crown of stars. This is the moment Luz Reyes has both yearned for and dreaded. She steps out of the chorus and marches across the floor, an ornately beaded ceinture around her waist jingling with every step. She times her movements precisely to the ominous rhythm of an Egyptian drum solo. No longer a frightened exotic dancer nor an anonymous member of the chorus, she is now the god Dionysus who has come with gifts for women.

Standing directly in front of Reyes, Baez mimics her every move until the figure eights of Reyes's hips become too complicated. The glamorous, gold-spangled belly-dance belt is doing prop duty as the crown of stars that Dionysus gives Ariadne. In the Greek myth, Dionysus crowns Ariadne alone. For this prison version, Reyes bestows the gift of creativity upon every woman in the Inside Out program.

First Reyes unties the belt and drapes it around Baez's hips, staying close to the young heroine's side to model moves for her in case she gets stumped. Then one by one, Reyes brings each dancer forward and drapes her in the belt. Carr shimmy on tiptoe. Chapman frames her face with her arms as she swivels her hips. Gomez pretends to be shy, burrowing into the tile floor as Reyes drags her forward and gagging while she ties on the belt, before spinning ecstatically. Cantin can't wait for Reyes to finish tying the belt before she begins pumping her legs. She wiggles so furiously that the belt falls to the floor around her ankles. Rivera is the last to step forward, switching her hips and smiling shyly as the inmates in the audience cheer her on.

Reyes giggles when she takes back the belt and fumbles trying to replace it on her own hips, breaking her concentration for the first time. When she succeeds, she is the god again. For the finale, she leads the group through a series of turns that grow tighter as the drum beats faster.

While the rest of the group basks in the accolades of their fellow inmates, Carr searches the expression of her mentor Leslie Neal. She stays behind as the rest of the inmates file out, reliving the show's highlights with Neal.

Suddenly Carr realizes she's lost track of time. It is already dark outside the glass double doors; there's not an inmate to be seen on the compound. The yard might be closed. Carr calls out to a guard patrolling in the distance. He might agree to escort her to her dorm -- or he might put her in lock. "Hurry up!" he yells. Carr rushes out, crossing the blue lines.

Since 1994 Artspring has run the Inside Out arts program for women inmates as well as the Breaking Free arts program for youthful offenders and at-risk girls. Currently Artspring conducts eight ongoing weekly classes in Miami-Dade, Broward, and Pinellas counties. *New Times* staff writer Celeste Fraser Delgado works with the Spanish class at the Homestead Correctional Institution. All personal information shared during Inside Out class is confidential; inmates featured in this article agreed to be interviewed outside of class.