

San Francisco Chronicle - February 8, 2007
Hard look at need_ 'Criminal of Poverty'

Reyhan Harmanci

Lisa Gray-Garcia (or "Tiny") has been struggling with poverty and homelessness all her life.

It's hard to figure out exactly how to begin a memoir about being poor. There are just so many places to start. When Gray-Garcia located a moment to open her memoir, "Criminal of Poverty: Growing Up Homeless in America" (City Lights Books; \$15.95; 287 pages), it didn't come easy.

"I knew the opening scene. I knew when I started putting pen to page that I had to begin where things fell apart for me and my mom personally," Gray-Garcia remembers, describing the afternoon in Los Angeles when her 11-year-old self begged her mother, Dee, to stick with a job that would at least keep rent money coming. "I holed myself up in one of our tiny office spaces, and cried, so hard, for five hours.

"But even though I knew the beginning, it was really difficult. After I wrote about 100 pages, I started to realize it needed to go back further, to my mother and my grandmother. That took another two years."

The basic outline of Gray-Garcia's story is this: She was born poor, the daughter of a mixed-race woman and an absent father. Her parents divorced when she was 4, and her mother's struggles merged with her own. As a preteen, she was acting as advocate for her mother, another woman born into poverty. The book details their drifts around California. But make no mistake -- this is no Horatio Alger story of individual success in a capitalist system. Focusing on the individual, Gray-Garcia says, is the nut of the problem with state services to aid the poor. Instead of pulling families apart and criminalizing the poor, she advocates policies to keep them together.

"Certainly, many times, I was encouraged to leave my mother," she says, "as if that was the solution."

Finding their own voices meant the Gray-Garcias could begin tugging at the bootstraps of a whole community. In 1999, they founded Poor Magazine (which became the Poor Press and Poor News Network, holding workshops and community events). As every independent publisher knows, starting a magazine ideally involves bottomless pits of dedication and funding. Poor Magazine had the dedication but not the funding. No trust funds here. After establishing the magazine with some flourish in the late '90s, Gray-Garcia took a series of personal and professional hits that would sink most people. Instead, she channeled that energy into a book.

"2002 was a difficult time," Gray-Garcia says, slowly and carefully. "My mom was diagnosed with an illness, something from her past that came back to haunt her, and at the same moment that I lost all the funding for Poor, I became pregnant. I was back in the rabbit hole."

Today, Gray-Garcia's Poor Network is back up, but the future is uncertain. She wants to emphasize, though, that her story is important in as much as it can educate and hopefully illuminate the struggles of many people who float in the cycle of poverty. Her author events are perfect examples of this: She reads, but so do many other members of the Poor Press team.

In this way, she can drive home the point that the solutions to poverty lie in community-based approaches. "What people don't understand is that we, in America, are constantly getting messages that we should be caring for ourselves at the expense of our families," she says. "I call it the cult of individuality. We're taught to leave behind people who are not well, who are old; we segregate people by ages, wellness, color, class ... we're taught that it's OK to leave people behind. And that's really not OK."

Lisa Gray-Garcia and other Poor Press writers read at 7 p.m. today. Modern Times, 888 Valencia St., S.F. (415) 282-9246. www.poormagazine.org.

Reyhan Harmanci, rarmanci@sfchronicle.com

<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2007/02/08/NSGRJN8N2K1.DTL>

This article appeared on page G - 18 of the San Francisco Chronicle

Criminal of Poverty
Growing Up Homeless
in America

By Tiny, a.k.a. Lisa Gray-Garcia
CITY LIGHTS; 287 Pages; \$15.95 PAPERBACK