

Community Literacy Journal

Volume 11

Issue 1 Fall, Special Issue: Building Engaged
Infrastructure

Article 10

Fall 2016

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Recommended Citation

Ryder, Phyllis M. "From Reciprocity to Interdependence: Mass Incarceration and Service-Learning." Community Literacy Journal, vol. 11, no. 1, 2016, pp. 94–105, doi:10.25148/clj.11.1.009252.

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From Reciprocity to Interdependence: Mass Incarceration and Service-Learning

Phyllis Mentzell Ryder

Abstract

This essay considers the difficulty of seeing systems of oppression—a challenging first step of writing for social change. I argue that service-learning faculty and public writing scholars have relied on outdated ways of thinking about racism and oppression, treating social issues as isolated instances of discrimination. Instead, by drawing from Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow*, I argue that we need to recognize that mass incarceration has created a new racial caste system and is the root cause uniting many social problems. Mass incarceration and neoliberalism work together to exclude millions of people from economic and civic life, stain them with moral condemnation so that they remain invisible to the majority, and divert public attention from the flaws in our political and economic structures. I use examples from a local nonprofit to illustrate how this framework offers a new approach to service-learning and public writing.

Keywords: systemic oppression, mass incarceration, neoliberalism, public writing, writing for social change

All the Odds against Black Men in DC.

Ryan Gilbert

These shoes have to jump so many hurdles in
this race to be free.

If I do well in school, will I jump over jail?

If I run past time, will time really tell?

Or will my shoes turn to boots as I write
this next poem from a cell?

Will the teachers understand that it's a little
different for me?

Will they try a little harder so that I can
see?

Will the preacher say a special prayer? Will the social workers really care?

It doesn't seem that as a child this should be my fault.

I have all these hurdles to jump before I can even walk.

As I look out of my window and see the dope-fiends nod....

I'm just a young black brother trying to beat all these odds.



Life Pieces to Masterpieces,
"Against All Odds"

I begin with a painting, *Against All Odds*, that was created collaboratively by young boys at Life Pieces to Masterpieces (LPTM). LPTM creates the space where boys from one of DC's poorest, blackest, and most violent neighborhoods can discover and express their own power and beauty. The organization's name is their vision: African American young men who might feel their lives are in pieces can turn themselves into masterpieces. The boys come together after school and during the summer in an affirming curriculum of creative practice, meditation, academics, and discipline, where they "*Connect, Create, Contribute, Celebrate*" (LPTM, "*Our Process*"). They collaboratively brainstorm, design, and stitch their signature sewn canvas art, which is shown in galleries and office buildings throughout DC.

Some Mistakes in Teaching Writing for Social Change

Over the past ten years, LPTM has been a community partner to my service-learning class, Writing for Social Change.¹ Like many in our field, I am committed

to designing writing classes in which students recognize social problems as complex webs of material and institutional histories. I want students—indeed, all citizens—to know how to read the layered contexts of situations they may be part of, to understand the available means and potential barriers for persuasion, and to understand that to create change they must engage with others to build agency and take action. I believe my students learn this best by working with community leaders who practice this work every day.

Writing faculty who teach service-learning classes have productively debated the goals for such classes—whether it's enough for students to gain critical awareness about social issues, whether classes must contribute tangible outcomes that the community values, and how that might be measured (For reviews, see Coogan; Jacobi). However, I want to enter the discussion earlier. This essay considers the difficulty of seeing and naming systems of oppression, which is a challenging first step whichever pedagogical approach one takes on.

Like David Coogan in “Service Learning and Social Change: The Case for Materialist Rhetoric,” I write to explore a failure. Coogan reviews a public writing project where he and his students did not dig deeply enough into the historical and material contexts of their rhetorical situation. They distributed flyers that encouraged parents in a Chicago neighborhood to run for local school councils; the flyers emphasized the value of local control and accountability. Few people responded. Unknowingly, these two concepts betrayed an innocence about Chicago school's institutional power dynamics. As Coogan discovered after the fact, the Central Board of Education decades before had seemed to agree to share power with community group through local school councils. However, the mayor had diverted the funds to train and support those councils; he did so the name of accountability. Given this history, the flyers reinforced a history of powerlessness. Coogan uses this moment to argue that a full analysis of the available means of persuasion in any moment must take into account the structures of power: “rhetoric becomes powerful when it articulates hegemonic consensus and manages to use that consensus as a lever to pull down material resources” (688).

I take a similar approach in this essay by examining my own ignorance about a system of oppression that lands especially hard on bodies in minority communities. Although I have worked for the past decade with community organizations to end homelessness, food insecurity, the academic achievement gap, and other manifestations of institutional racism, I missed entirely the system of mass incarceration. Michelle Alexander and Ta-Nehsisi Coates explain that an unjust judicial system has created a new racial caste system in America. If service-learning faculty wish to understand hegemonic consensus and expose the networks of power and material resources that are marshaled to reinforce that consensus, we must interrogate this system of mass incarceration. If we hope to teach others how to write for social change, we need to understand how this system has operated for decades without detection, how it undergirds the many social issues we have sought to address, and how to extend our service-learning pedagogies to account for it.

Rhetorics of Colorblindness and Criminality

In less than thirty years, Michelle Alexander tells us in *The New Jim Crow*, that the “US penal population [exploded] from around 30,000 to more than two million” (6). The US has the highest incarceration rates of any country. Those affected are disproportionately black. In 2000, young black males were locked up ten times more than their white peers (Coates 64). Alexander observes that “in Washington DC, our nation’s capitol, it is estimated that three out of four young black men (and nearly all those in the poorest neighborhoods) can expect to serve time in prison” and be “subject to legalized discrimination for the rest of their lives” (7).

How is it possible that our justice system lands with such force on black bodies, and how has it managed to do so without triggering outcries from Americans who have learned to be ever vigilant against racism? Alexander lays out a compelling case that America—black and white, rich and poor—tolerates such racial injustice because the infrastructure of mass incarceration operates through the rhetorics of *criminality* and *colorblindness*.

When Americans think about how to detect and fight racism, we draw on what we are taught about the Civil Rights Movement—or rather, we draw on a conveniently distorted but very pervasive understanding of that movement: We think we are supposed to stop seeing race. Every January, we hear that beautiful line from the Rev. Dr. King, “I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.” We look for racism to show up in explicit racial language. We didn’t catch the work-around. Alexander writes:

What has changed since the collapse of Jim Crow has less to do with the basic structure of our society than with the language we use to justify it. In the era of colorblindness, it is no longer socially permissible to use race, explicitly, as a justification for discrimination, exclusion, and social contempt. So we don’t. Rather than rely on race, we use our criminal justice system to label people of color “criminals” and then engage in all of the practices we supposedly left behind. (2)

We’re not arresting people because they’re black, we say, but because they are criminals. This is about security, we insist, and nothing more.

Our misunderstanding about how racism now operates keeps us from noticing the immense repercussions of this criminal label. Alexander explains that the criminal justice system and a “larger web of laws, rules, policies, and customs” control those labeled “criminals” before, during, and after their time in prison (13). The mass incarceration system uses fear about drugs and safety to arrest a disproportionate number of people of color; then, it uses a rhetoric of colorblindness to forestall legal scrutiny of this disparity. She walks us through the political rhetoric that initiated the War on Drugs and demands mandatory sentencing, the colorblind legal rhetoric that

cannot recognize cases of racial profiling, and a “tough on crime” rhetoric that denies social services to anyone with a criminal record. These rhetorics of colorblindness and criminality pervade media coverage of the supposed drug war, which in turn creates the crisis that fuels politicians to get tougher and tougher on crime with federal funding laws that incentivize police districts so that they will make more drug arrests, the Law Enforcement Officers’ Bill of Rights, and employment and housing policies that exclude ex-criminals. The result is a system of social control that permeates all parts of life, and relegates African Americans to a racial caste, segregated from and disdained by everyone else: the new Jim Crow.

We set up policies to contain and punish those who make bad choices, but we enforce these policies unevenly. Police arrest African Americans more often, not because they make more bad choices than white Americans do, but because the police—like most Americans—assume that they’ll find more crime in those neighborhoods. Then, because there are more arrests in those neighborhoods, the impression is reinforced. Furthermore, as Alexander documents with painful clarity, when people hold up the statistics and demonstrate with data that the mass incarceration system has unfairly impacted people of color, the courts look away. The courts define racial discrimination as acts of individual malevolence, so they cannot find fault unless they have proof that the cop pulling you over, or the judge handing down a tougher sentence, or the parole officer refusing your petition did so with an explicit intention of treating you differently based on race. The consequence of all this uneven police attention has life-long repercussions. Whole communities have been stripped of fathers and uncles and mothers and aunts; the social safety net has been pulled away for anyone who remains.

Connecting the Dots in Service-Learning Writing Classes

I am sure this is not a surprise to some of you. Alexander reminds us that people living in the communities who are most impacted have already connected the dots. Likewise, activists and scholars who work with prisoners or their families are well aware of how the rhetoric of criminality works (see Jacobi). But even Alexander herself—trained as a lawyer, working with ACLU and other prominent civil rights groups—did not readily see how the rhetoric of colorblindness and criminality works. I certainly didn’t. I knew that I didn’t like the school to prison pipeline and racial profiling and the War on Drugs, but I hadn’t connected the dots.

My pedagogical model drew heavily from Keith Morton’s “The Irony of Service,” where the twin ideals for responsible service-learning are 1) building deep and nonhierarchical relationships with community members and 2) understanding the systemic root causes of social issues. The two main essays I assigned emphasized these goals. The first asked students to analyze whether a community organization’s rhetoric counters dominant conceptions about the community and community members. For example, *Life Pieces to Masterpieces* emphasizes that their apprentices are active, dignified agents, who are neither to blame for their current situation nor helpless to address it. You can hear this in their purpose:

We love to say that when youth are awakened to a sense of purpose, their power is limitless. At LPTM, our Purpose is to provide opportunities to African American males ages 3 to 25 to discover and activate their innate creative abilities to change challenges into possibilities. (Life Pieces to Masterpieces “Human Development System”)

They convey their deep affection and commitment to each other through the familial names with which they address each other: Brother Ryan, Brother Maurice, Aunt Lo, Elder Bill.

The second main essay assignment invites students to identify a social issue or question that arises from their work with the community. Students study how the organization extends or counters academic scholarship about the root causes of social issues and the most appropriate ways to intervene. Students write to expose oppressive institutional policies and practices. For example, I have modeled my teaching on Paula Mathieu and Diana George’s work on homelessness. I have advised students to compare the *Washington Post* stories about homelessness with the perspectives from our local street newspaper, *Street Sense*. I have invited students to observe the architectural designs built into public spaces throughout the city to make it impossible for homeless people to sleep on park benches. Students work to reverse the stereotypes about who is homeless and why, even as they question the public policies that make it harder for people to live with dignity. Likewise, in projects about the academic achievement gap and parental engagement, students investigate racial disparities in school discipline policies, such as the ways that the curricula presume a middle class, white identity and diminish the experiences of those at the margins, as well as how parental involvement programs presume two-parent families who have the time and educational confidence to volunteer in classrooms.

When I consider how the opening poem, “Against All Odds,” might inform either of these assignments, I am struck by the limitations of my approach, which steered me to see the poem as a critique of social service providers: the teachers don’t listen, the social workers don’t care, a preacher has given up on this young soul. While I would have been concerned about the potential for jail, I would not have recognized the enormous tension building in the poem. Now, however, the dope-fiend’s nod and the black boots take on more meaning. Though Brother Ryan was only in elementary school when he wrote the poem, he already knew the odds were against him. Nearly all young boys in his neighborhood will serve time in prison (Alexander 7). Given the manufactured crisis of the War on Drugs, where militarized police benefit financially from drug arrests and find it easier to target poor, minority communities, we can no longer shake our heads about misguided social service providers. Our analysis of systemic racism has to tackle the perverse and constant criminalization of the black body.

In my class, as in the scholarship about service-learning and writing for social change, the particular social issues we investigate have remained as isolated dots. We study homelessness or school discipline policies or media portrayals of black masculinity, but we rarely see the lines that connect them to each other—the chains

yanked tight by the heavy weight of mass incarceration. Homelessness, for example, is a node in this system. In her fourth chapter, “The Cruel Hand,” Alexander exposes the impossible cycle of criminality and homelessness. Once you have been found to be criminal—particularly in cases involving drugs—you have a hard time finding work, because you are required to inform prospective employers of your criminal record² and are banned from some professions for the rest of your life. You are also banned from public housing and food assistance; you put your family at risk of eviction by visiting. The school system is another node. As Henry Giroux has documented, schools have become militarized zones, with disciplinary policies that disproportionately land youth of color in the juvenile justice system (31) where they are more likely to be tried as adults (28). When we wonder how to engage parents, we must acknowledge that no one with a drug-related offense—even a minor one, and even after serving their time—can enter a school building. We have to connect the dots and challenge the rhetoric of criminality that controls these situations. Until we do, no proposals for social change will unsettle the pervasive mechanism that chews up so many people, families, and communities.

Neoliberal Interdependence in the Era of Mass Incarceration

So far, my analysis has stressed how the justice system tears apart communities of color, but I have not yet shown that it affects people outside these communities. Without that analysis, many will hear this as a call to correct these systems *on behalf of others*. To really challenge oppression, however, citizens must fight for change because they need it *for their own lives*. As bell hooks puts it, “Until we are all able to accept the interlocking, interdependent nature of systems of domination and recognize specific ways each system is maintained, we will continue to act in ways that undermine our individual quest for freedom and collective liberation struggle” (290). To see this interdependence, I argue, we have to locate mass incarceration within a broader system: global, free-market capitalism.

Capitalism is a system for moving money from the poor and middle classes into the coffers of the one percent. It requires that we believe that the investors are the real engines of the economy, that workers are merely a cost of business, and that everyone can get ahead through hard work. An extension of capitalism is *neoliberalism*, a political view promoted by politicians on both the left and the right, in which the “central tenets of free-market economics [serve as] the general principle for creating the good life and society” (Keith 6). According to this system, citizens create change not through politics but through the market; they can “vote with the wallet” or start businesses to address community needs. Citizens are recast as consumers, as entrepreneurs focused on maximizing profit, and as volunteers who work through private a-political nonprofits.

Against this backdrop, LPTM’s ‘insistence that the worth of their apprentices comes through creative expression is a repudiation of the main message of capitalism, which would only value economic labor. As I argue in *Rhetorics for Community Action* (47-55), LPTM creates a haven against the capitalist, consumer nihilism.

Life Pieces creates an “abundant community” where people are citizens rather than consumers (McKnight and Block).

When I overlay my new awareness of the racist criminal justice system, however, I see a new interplay between capitalism and mass incarceration. Capitalism and its political sidekick neoliberalism require that we believe in the American Dream. If too many people are visibly shut out of the Dream, capitalism and neoliberalism lose their shine. Except, of course, if the people are locked up. Mass incarceration provides a way to divert, sequester and demonize those who are shut out of this economic model. In the October 2015 *Atlantic Monthly*, Ta Nehisi Coates notes, “Employment and poverty statistics traditionally omit the incarcerated from official numbers” (66). When jobless rates from 2000 were recalculated to include incarcerated young black men, the joblessness rate among all young black men jumped to 32 percent. Overall, though, “the illusion of wage and employment progress is [. . .] made possible only through the erasure of the most vulnerable” (66). Remember, over two million people are incarcerated today.

Those who do not have family in prison or do not fear ending up there themselves might look at this as an uncomfortable advantage, but an advantage nevertheless. Fewer people in the workforce should mean less competition for jobs and a chance at higher wages. But working Americans do not enjoy better working conditions. Corporations maintain a rhetoric of scarcity and crisis to demand more work, deny wage increases, and pass the profits on to their shareholders. At the same time, they use the apparent success of capitalism to argue for more privatization of public functions and less regulation.

Public rhetoric scholars have identified rhetorical and material mechanisms that proponents of neoliberalism use to block citizen agency, and they introduce us to activists who challenge its apparent inevitability (see Keith; Riedner and Mohoney; Ryder, “Democratic Rhetoric”; Schell; Welch). These scholars and activists are outraged that citizens are losing their power. John Ackerman puts it this way:

For the rhetorical critic and citizen, what is truly grotesque is the imaginative distance that lies between new economic progressivism [neoliberalism] and the human costs borne by the planet and the “people” in unbridled, transnational capitalism *and the erasure of precisely those stark contrasts in everyday life* that could lead residents and critics to challenge the status quo. [emphasis added] (82)

Capitalism enjoys a long tradition of manipulating racism to ensure that working class whites and people of color do not form an alliance. Activist Chris Crass, drawing on the observation by W. E. B. DuBois, puts it bluntly: white people exchange economic justice for the psychological security of whiteness (n.p.). Racism pits the majority of people against each other, so that the one percent can remain in power. The mass incarceration system, itself bolstered by for-profit prisons, brings the rhetoric of criminality to the already pervasive moral commonplaces about deadbeats

and welfare queens, pushing them out of sight so that others will not notice that the economic system cannot sustain itself.

However, when citizens see that two million bodies have been sequestered, and that returning citizens are kept dependent and vulnerable long after they've served their time, they confront the failures of the neoliberal political model. The failure of our criminal justice system should concern us all, because the nation cannot sustain itself if the public loses all faith in police, courts, and judges. The failure of our economic infrastructure also should concern us, because if we do not correct course, the growing disparity between the rich and the poor will destroy us too.

Service-Learning in the Era of Neoliberal Mass Incarceration

Like all service-learning courses, a writing class designed to help students rhetorically analyze and intervene in systems of oppression must be attentive to how it builds relationships—how it positions students in relation to the community, and how it positions academic theories and knowledge against community expertise. My goal in this essay has been to introduce a way of reading the world through the lenses of mass incarceration and neoliberalism, and to show how these systems demand new approaches for reading and fighting oppression. My goal has also been to identify intersections among systems of oppression; to show that dismantling mass incarceration and neoliberalism is not about helping less fortunate people, but about intervening in systems that dehumanize and disempower all.

Yet what I have also learned in this process is to remain humble and attentive to what I don't yet see. For years, I thought I had a pretty sophisticated understanding about how institutional racism operated in the structures of American society, but I was unable to see a pervasive and devastating system that operated through a different rhetoric—the rhetoric of colorblind criminality. So I end not with a set of lessons, but rather with the suggestion to bring these theories into a class as a point of inquiry. I hope that others might do as I have done, exploring these findings alongside those who live, love, and work on the front lines.

After I read *The New Jim Crow*, I reviewed the websites and publications of the organizations I partner with, looking for signs that they might link their missions in some way to the system of mass incarceration. My earlier re-reading of "Against All Odds" is an example this process. Then, I visited staff and asked whether Alexander's perspective influences their work. I am still learning and growing from these conversations. On the one hand, most community leaders respect Alexander's structural analysis; on the other hand, some worry that the analysis permits people to shrug off responsibility for the choices they must make daily to reject "the drug fiend's nod." Community leaders whom I deeply respect find Ta-Nehisi Coates' *Between the World and Me* similarly troubling—accurate in many ways, but too pessimistic to offer direction for the youth they would mentor. So I offer Alexander and Coates' analysis here not as a final word, but as the beginning of inquiry that I hope we can all continue to investigate and explore with our students, and in collaboration with community leaders.

Notes

1 After partnering with Life Pieces to Masterpieces in my service-learning composition class for over ten years, I now serve on the Board.

2 Some cities and states have approved “Ban the box” legislation that defers any discussion about criminality to later in an interview process.

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