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Visualizing Abolition: Two Graphic Novels and a Critical Approach to Mass Incarceration for the Composition Classroom

Michael Sutcliffe

Washington State University Vancouver, msut@wsu.edu

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Visualizing Abolition: Two Graphic Novels and a Critical Approach to Mass Incarceration for the Composition Classroom

In order to engage my students in critical conversations about uses of language that complicate and compliment the material, political, and economic realities of American lives, I began, in 2010, to specifically structure my introductory university writing course around the ways we think and talk about democratic ideals and social justice. The U.S. prison system inevitably surfaces in readings and conversations. While there is some disagreement about the exact number of Americans incarcerated, Wagner and Sakala (2014) reported that 2.4 million adults were being held in state and federal prisons at the time of their latest report, and more than 2 million more were under custodial supervision. The increasing frequency with which incarceration has been used as a solution to problems over the last four decades has left conditions in American prisons dangerous and unhealthy.

I initially supported writing assignments with texts by Angela Davis, Ruth Wilson Gilmore, Michelle Alexander, and other familiar names in prison studies. Students looked for and found the origins and outcomes of mass incarceration in cycles of poverty, in unequal access to education, in the unequal and prejudiced distribution of resources like food and housing, and, especially, in the criminal legal system itself. I was impressed and satisfied with the depth of our in-class conversations, but when students began to submit writing assignment drafts, I found that my predominantly middle-class, White students had dismissed the readings and reverted to pre-existing opinions about justice, inequality, and crime. These students were protected by (and protective of) their social privilege, and the things they read did not transfer beyond the summaries I asked them to write. While they could identify problems in the legal system, they did so without a sense of importance or urgency. They reported inequalities but they did not feel the violence and injury of incarceration, and they had little awareness of the millions of lives that had been destroyed.

I supplemented the texts, but my students complained that my assigned readings on racism and homo and trans-phobias were too angry. They felt that while there may be validity in the data, the tone invalidated the arguments as hasty and in-credible. Students with developing fluency in academic discourse usually describe academic writing as primarily “cold” and “emotionless.” They feel that academic inquiry should be objective, although their understanding of objectivity includes both formal (depersonalized grammar) and epistemic (dehistoricized content). The anger in the texts I assigned was not accidental or incidental, but my students did not understand. Building on Foucault’s explanation of power working in reverse and Raymond Williams’ concept of “structures of feeling,” Heather Love (2009) explains objectivity as an ideological

agent and says that “feeling backward” or re-fusing the analytical with the personal in critical inquiry “lays bare the conditions of exclusion and inequality and it gestures toward alternative trajectories for the future.” Objectivity legitimizes apathy as a means of depowering rage and stabilizing would be revolution. In other words, interrupting their common sense narratives about crime would mean breaking down the barriers that students erect between themselves and the lives wrecked by legislated disparity.

This belief that writing is a depoliticized, mechanical skill is at the center of what my course intends to interrupt. Discourse is, after all, often what convinces a police officer or judge to release rather than detain. Stigmatized dialects and language variation create impressions, and the (in)ability of defendants to articulate a defense can determine the outcome of a legal inquiry, whether on the street or in the courtroom. Yasuko Kanno (2010) cautions against enacting a “symbolic violence” through pedagogies that privilege middle class culture “as if it were inherently more valuable than the cultures of the working class and the poor.” Limiting conversations about the political exigency of anger not only reinforces the logo-centrism of Western hegemony but also the marginalization of multilingual students and students of color.

In my early attempts at this course, I realized that my ability to meaningfully engage students in conversations that challenge status-quo attitudes and ideas about crime is contingent upon students’ ability to connect the lives of others to their own. My course was failing to provide an accessible emotive appeal that could help students to see through others’ eyes. Students far removed from the legal system, I found, needed to *feel* the isolation and desperation of near-permanent poverty and mass incarceration, and they needed texts that linked the ways they consume media away from school with the ways I was asking them to approach texts in class.

Numerous scholars have written about the ability of graphic novels to bridge literacies and to infuse texts with pathos. The National Council for Teachers of English (2005) states that graphic novels “can be used as a ‘point of reference’ to bridge what students already know with what they have yet to learn.” Students can approach visual media as a meeting point with their lives rather than as a departure, and look to the ways visual rhetoric complicates conventional readings, especially around particularly affective topics. Joddy Murray (2009) contrasts the rhetoric of contemporary mixed media with plain text in ways that emphasize the ideological nature of sequential meaning making:

[Graphic media] is symbolized language, but it is a form not limited to the chain-of-reasoning we require in discursive text. Its strength, in part, is that it can accommodate meaning unsuited to sequencing – unutterable, affective, ephemeral – and that there are connections through images that may lead to further articulation.

The value of non-discursive text, therefore, is that it thrives and derives its meaning from the complexity and ambiguity of the medium.

While the texts I introduced provided students with perspective and data, they did so in a manner that reinforced a pre-existing, logo-centric epistemology. Graphic novels, however, can challenge students' ideas as well as their ways of thinking by creating meanings that contradict the logic of capitalism and its reliance upon an objective anti-pathos. James Bucky Carter (2013) explains that reading text and visual representation together is less of a logical, cognitive process of translation or code-switching, and is, instead, "something more akin to transcended comprehension; something more akin to... *literacy*." Working from these ideas, I assigned two graphic novels that I had been using in my own research, and I paired them with a dialectical journaling activity. The results were astoundingly successful.

What follows is an overview. The following sections include my course rationale, an overview of the two novels I use, and a description of my journaling assignment with some anecdotes of its success. This description is intended to allow others to benefit from my failures and continue the conversations started in my class; however, I do caution that different locations and populations will bring students into the conversation in different places with challenges that may differ from those I experienced. Students who have struggled with the criminal legal system will have a vastly different perspective than those who have never been in the back seat of a police car. My approach is built around bringing students' own ideas into dialog with popular perspectives that counter mainstream media. Focusing on students' ideas in the context of current events should allow students to find their own way-in from whatever subject position they occupy, but teachers should, of course, be ready to modify and supplement what I have done.

Rationale: Complicity in a Criminal Anti-Democracy

Justice has become a shifting concept in the United States as the public is becoming increasingly aware of disconnects between purported democratic values and the application and enforcement of laws. In May 2011, the U.S. Supreme Court ordered the state of California to release 30,000 prisoners because, as Justice Kennedy explained, "the medical and mental health care provided by California's prisons has fallen short of minimum constitutional requirements and has failed to meet prisoners' basic health needs" (Hing). Pervasive overcrowding has exceeded even the massive capacity of the Golden State, and others are not far behind. It has become clear that the United States simply does not have the material and economic resources to maintain its reliance upon incarceration as a solution to social and economic problems.

Further, acts of state sponsored violence on the street have become so numerous and egregious as to be un-ignorable even by those whose social and economic privileges remove them from harm's way. In April 2015, Daily Kos writer Shaun King reported that more people had been killed in March by police officers in the United States than had been killed by police in the UK *since 1900*. Responding to police shootings of unarmed Black men in Baltimore, in Ferguson, in Florida, and in Oakland, Hillary Clinton (2015) stated in a keynote address that patterns of racism in the enforcement of law "have become unmistakable and undeniable" and demonstrate that "there is something profoundly wrong" with our criminal legal system. Changed laws and social norms have quieted some overtly racist behaviors, but the criminalization of specific lifestyles has institutionalized racial disparity and legitimated state violence. According to Department of Justice census data, Black men make up more than half of the adult prison population, while comprising less than 15% of the U.S. population (Bureau 2010). Black, Hispanic, and Native Americans are far more likely than White Americans to be stopped, searched, and detained by police, and White Americans, even when arrested, are far less likely to be sentenced even if they are found guilty of a crime.

Once classified by the criminal legal system, social and economic disadvantage is masked by blame and a pervasive sense of righteous indignation. Media reports omit the economic and political circumstances of a community in favor of reporting only the "facts" of an event. This lapse reinforces a link between criminality and behavior rather than with exigencies like limited access to education and entire neighborhoods stripped of working age adults. Laws that target specific neighborhoods and communities are sold to the public as proportional, directed responses to crime rather than as discursive technologies that play a role in determining what crime is and where it will occur. Michele Foucault (1980) tells us that the modern discourse of criminology emerges from "within the social body, rather than from above it" in order to justify specific relations of power. As members of society are classified and criminalized and crimes are reported by the media, the public sphere fractures and turns in on itself. The new common sense says that because we have so many crimes, we must have a predator lurking just around the next corner. Popular TV crime dramas like *Law and Order*, *Criminal Minds*, and *Orange is the New Black* coalesce with news reports to amplify and validate feelings of fear and vulnerability. Instead of seeking ways to alleviate inequities, we are taught to fear and blame.

The recursive system of media reports, legislative response, and police policy shifts creates a "common sense" mythology of who and what we understand as "criminal." Mainstream media reports warn us to look towards each other, and especially towards Others, in order to spot criminals that have not yet been identified. After presenting panels with video scenarios depicting possible

crimes, Justin T. Pickett and other researchers from The Sentencing Project (2014) found that White respondents “overestimate the proportion of crime committed by people of color and associate people of color with criminality” *even when no crime was committed*. In a daily media barrage, White middle class property owners are shown decontextualized, dehistoricized “evidence” of people of color committing crimes as *de facto* proof that people of color commit more crimes, and this proof has become widely accepted. Racism, which has become publically unpalatable in overt acts, has been renamed “neighborhood watch” and “broken windows policing” and used to justify acts that would otherwise be irreconcilable with democratic ideals. Rates of arrest and incarceration *seem* to validate stereotypes of violent, uneducated people of color, and, as a result, our nation’s prisons, jails, and police cars are filled past capacity, mostly with people of color.

The public is, however, starting to recognize connections between criminality, history, and economics, and public discourse is beginning to shift away from redesigning policies and towards redefining justice. As political activists and leaders admit the accumulation of unexplained, specific failures, they are starting to consider that widespread inequities are evidence of a misconceived system inspired by a faulty conceit. The prison is not broken; it does just what it was ideologically designed to do: it segregates and disappears populations deemed to be offensively surplus. For the students in my university classroom, however, state-sponsored injustice remains largely an exotic, foreign problem. They are shielded by middle class economic advantages and by the cultural privileges afforded to White Americans. They speak in dialects, wear clothing, and frequent neighborhoods that profiling overlooks. Fears of arrest, detention, and police violence are easily dismissed, and when they are forced to confront the evidence, they blame violence on the victims. These students are voters and future policy makers, yet they have little understanding of the disparity between touted American ideals and the violence and oppression committed in all of our names.

Democracy is dependent upon each generation understanding the ways that uses of language direct the distribution of resources and the application of law, yet it seems that many students are comfortable with ignorance. My students frequently endorse aggressive policing, punitive incarceration, and a retributive approach to criminality, yet they struggle when they are asked for a rationale. They rely uncritically on television and internet pundits for opinions, but they do not ask for nor seek evidence to support their assertions. Their criteria for evaluating media seem to be alignment with pre-existing beliefs and congruency with the tenets of neoliberalism. They see education as workplace training and media as truth, when it agrees with what they’ve heard before. Henry Giroux (2011) explains the effect of this epistemology:

The calculating logic of an instrumentalized, corporatized, and privatized education does more than diminish the moral and political vision necessary to sustain a vibrant democracy and an engaged notion of social agency; it also undermines the development of public spaces where matters of dissent, public conscience, and social justice are valued and offered protection against the growing anti-democratic tendencies that are enveloping much of the United States and many other parts of the world.

Not only does students' rejection of authentic critical thinking about economic and political trends limit the transfer of course content but also it threatens to perpetuate systems and cycles of poverty, disenfranchisement, and exclusion to become near-permanent qualities. Instead, as Giroux says, our students must see that language use, especially in the information age of social media, is a "fundamentally political act" (40).

Students often don't see it, but an explicit consideration of argument and critical thinking through a process of inventing, drafting, and revising has an important role in countering anti-democratic narratives. John Duffy (2012) explains that the first year writing course "engages students, inevitably and inescapably, in questions of ethics, values, and virtues." The writing process and academic readers' expectations for accountability and respect challenge students' uncritical reliance on "common sense" ideas and instead direct them to question and authentically learn. In the context of writing assignments and classroom activities, it is difficult to reconcile democratic ideals with institutions that are explicitly designed to aristocratize (de-democratize) by removing the people, the demos, from democracy. By demonstrating how uses of language can mask or reveal contradictions between idealization and application, students can understand the ways we collectively perpetuate injustices through our daily uses of language. However, our ability to demonstrate this is contingent upon the texts we bring to the class and the ways we engage students with them.

Textbooks: Two Graphic Novels and a Plan for Abolition

Most existing textbooks about U.S. prison policy reinforce a largely unchallenged ideological framework of prison reform; reformers believe that incarceration is a generally sound concept that has, at times, just been poorly executed. As a result, policy changes are implemented to improve specific conditions but without substantive changes to the institution or to the distribution of arrests. There has, in the last decade, been a shift in the national conversation and more attention has been paid to the abhorrent conditions faced by prisoners. However, only a fraction of this conversation has been directed towards decreasing our reliance upon incarceration as a principle means of responding to

problems. *Race to Incarcerate* and *The Real Cost of Prisons Comix* introduce an alternate ideology of prison *abolition* wherein we replace incarceration with education, healthcare (including mental health support) and economic assistance in the form of job support, housing options, and food assurance. In meaningfully different ways, these two texts trace the development of modern incarceration from its roots in slavery in order to demonstrate its essential anti-democratic nature. In doing so, they seek not only a change in the national conversation but a paradigmatic shift in our thinking as well.

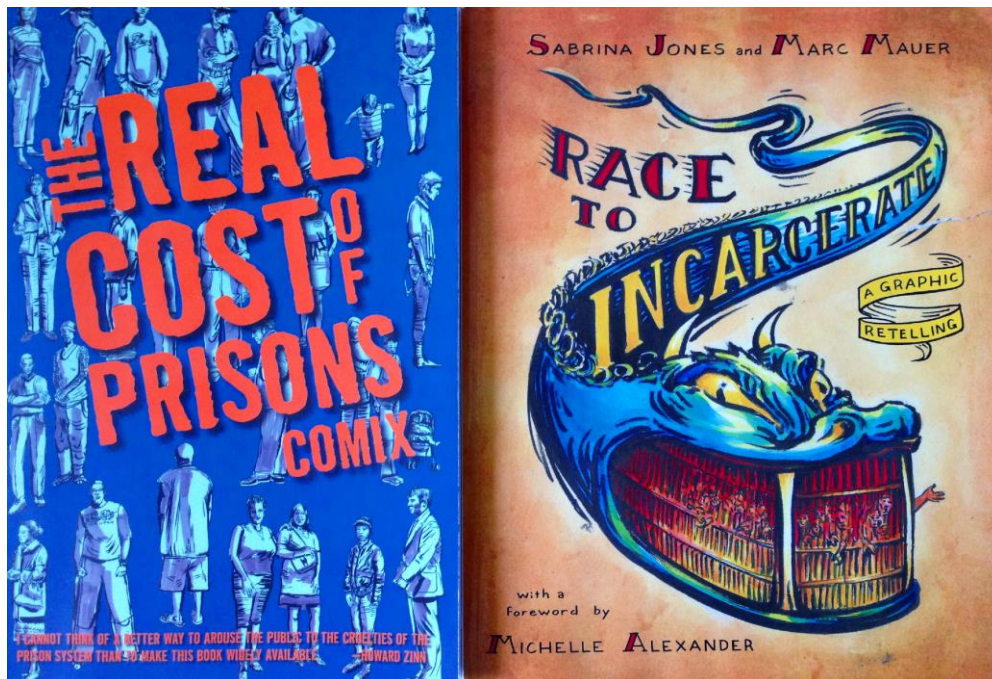


Figure 1. Two graphic novels on incarceration. Personal photo by author.

To accomplish this ideological turn, these graphic novels engage readers in a broad, systemic overview but achieve depth through contextualized examples. The use of illustrations alongside narration and textual annotation unpacks difficult intersections of seemingly disparate issues. Media reports tend to reduce complex topics into seemingly isolated “issues.” For example, prison overcrowding in California has been frequently written about in news reports but often without any consideration of the economic exclusions experienced by prisoners upon release. As Lois Ahrens (2008) points out, the inability of parolees to secure employment is a significant factor in recidivism and thus a major contributing factor to prison populations. The oversimplification of criminality invariably masks or completely efface the systemic from media analyses. When shown only the arrest report of an incarcerated person of color, voters (dis)miss

the historical roots of crime that lie in disenfranchisement, poverty, and limited access to material and economic resources. What makes these two texts more effective than traditional textbooks for use in the classroom is their ability to *accessibly* demonstrate these crucially central intersections and their ability to infuse this content with *feeling*.

Published in 2008, the *Real Cost of Prisons Comix* collects three previously published graphic-essays and brackets them with a critical introduction by prison activist-scholars Ruth Wilson Gilmore and Craig Gilmore, and reader response letters written by activists, scholars, and teachers who have used the original comics in their work. The collection features a preface explaining the choice of the “comic book” medium as well. While accessibility and publication efficiency is a significant attribute to a book intended to be read by students and activists, the visual medium also allows these novels to operate on a level that precedes and parallels readers’ conscious analysis of its content. The images “speak” to students on an emotional level as well as an intellectual one, and, as I mentioned previously, the images interrupt students’ reliance on a linear sense of logic.

Despite being illustrated by several artists, uniform, near-monotone grey-wash backgrounds capture the monotony and mundane existence of the prisoner. Importantly, this powerful use of the visual suggests a place for the observer in the text. Each image we see embodies a way of seeing of its own. As John Berger (1973) explains, viewers of an image “never look at just one thing; [they] are always looking at the relation between things and [them]selves.” The reader of this text is invited to add her own experiences to her interpretation bringing her into the content in a very personal way. This is a crucial and central element of this book. The writers who make up the pieces of this collection want us, above all, to understand that democracy, or its floundering, is the result of citizen participants’ actions. The *Real Cost of Prison Comix* dispels the mythology of the far-off prison and the exotic prisoner and instead shows readers our inevitable complicity in the propagation of the prison industrial complex and reveals prisoners as our friends, neighbors, and selves occupying a dramatically different but closely related space.



Figure 2. Use of greys to evoke emotion. *The Real Cost of Prisons Comix*.

The essays divide the book into three segments that can be read individually in support of a specific discussion or together as a more comprehensive picture of incarceration's effect on US society. Each section is followed by a glossary and a notes page that provides citation information and starting points for additional research. Furthermore, each is followed by a "readers respond" column where letters submitted by readers have been reprinted. These sections include letters from notable social justice activists like Howard Zinn and Marc Mauer; letters written by representatives of advocacy organizations like National Advocates for Pregnant Women and The Harm Reduction Coalition; and letters from students and teachers who have used the book academically. These letters not only offer praise but also point out ways that readers have built upon the text to engage others in conversations and activities.

The first essay, "Prison Town," offers readers a modeled city, "Anytown USA," and several first-name characters and narrates the events common to cities and towns around the country that built prisons in the 1980's and 90's. By alternating between dialogue bubbles and annotated charts, graphs, and images, this section dispels the economic myths around prison expansion and explains what expansions meant for both those incarcerated and those who lived in the towns where the prisons were built. In an included response letter, Howard Zinn points out that this section is particularly effective at demonstrating "how poverty and desperation bring people into a system which then exploits them for the profit of a prison-industrial complex." "Prison Town" demonstrates the ways that promises of local benefits and booming local economies actually play out as a loss of local autonomy and local family sovereignty in favor of national corporations' profits.

"Prisoners of the War on Drugs" profiles individuals who experience overlapping aspects of the criminal legal system. Stories titled "Bobby," "Yvonne," and "Sam & Alec" are used to unpack the influence our inherited ideologies of racism and sexism complicate a legal process purportedly designed to protect people with less social and economic affluence. This essay addresses a middle class, primarily white audience to consider the origins of sentencing and prison population demographics and how these interact with the way we think about crime. Using the story of two similar teenagers who each resort to drugs as a means of self-medicating, the essay challenges readers to understand the historical exegeses that lead a white youth involved in drugs into counseling and recovery with charges dropped while a similar Black youth goes to prison then is left homeless and unemployable once released. Moving from the specific pictures of each individual story into a broader discussion of U.S. drug policy, the section encapsulates the difficult intersection of ideology and policy.

The last essay, "Prisoners of a Hard Life: Women & Their Children," uses biographical profiles of real women to demonstrate the causes and "costs" of

incarceration that are particular to women and to their children. This section surpasses the familiar “convict” narrative genre, however. As explained in a letter from teacher Jody Sokolower, these stories narrate the women’s situations without reducing their complicated histories to a series of “don’t make the same mistake I did” anecdotes. This section’s profiles help readers to contextualize the “mistakes” made by women against lifetimes of abuse, neglect, and legislated criminality – one of the more difficult aspects of incarceration for an audience with middle class privilege to understand is the pervasiveness of limited or non-existent options and the ways that (drug) policy is written to marginalize those who do not fit into a social mold. The supposed “mistakes” of these women are contrasted against the greater faults of a society that distributes resources first to those who already have much and then punishes those who have few.

The book concludes with a section titled “Change is Possible,” which provides summaries of specific terms and topics. More than a simple glossary, these extended definitions explain possible “next steps” and alternatives to the contemporary incarceration-centric legal system.

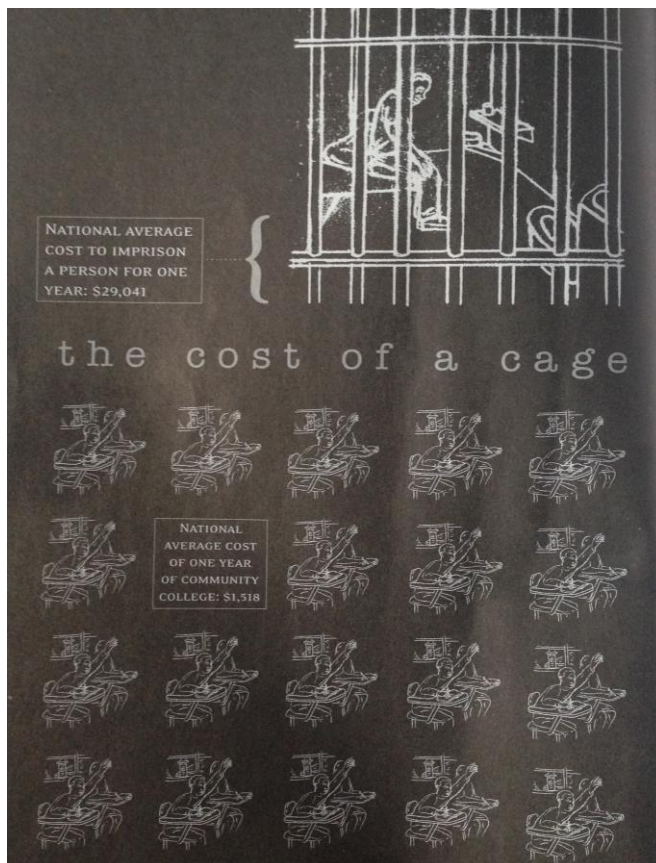


Figure 3. The cost of incarceration vs. college. *The Real Cost of Prisons Comix*.

If this book has a shortcoming, it is in its single edition publication run. Since the book was published in 2006, the criminal legal system has changed somewhat (for both better and worse) and updates could insure the book's continued relevancy. While there are no glaring inaccuracies, the expansion of private prisons and prison industries in the US are somewhat absent. Fortunately *Race to Incarcerate: a Graphic Retelling* was published a few years later and neatly complements the stories and artwork of *The Real Cost of Prisons Comix*.

In a brief forward, prison activist-scholar Michelle Alexander explains that for over a decade, the all-text edition of *Race to Incarcerate* was her immediate recommendation to “anyone who wanted to understand how and why we became the world leader in imprisonment.” Published in 2013, *Race to Incarcerate: a Graphic Retelling* is a visual adaptation of the original activist anchor-text. Author Marc Mauer has been an activist involved with and leading programs seeking to change criminal legal policy for over 30 years, and he is the writer of some of the most widely distributed work in the field. For this rendering, Mauer partnered with activist-artist Sabrina Jones in an attempt to reach an even wider audience. Unlike the three individually written and illustrated essays of *The Real Cost of Prisons Comix*, this novel's single-style graphics brings a sense of continuity that links seemingly separate topics through similar art.



Figure 4. Contrast to emphasize political-economic disparity. *Race to Incarcerate*.

Race to Incarcerate uses a 3rd person style that seems journalistic and objective, but employs art that does not suppress horror and rage. Jones's striking heavy black and white style conveys the feelings of fear and desperation common to those whose lives have been ripped apart by incarceration. Jones forgoes dialog bubbles and, instead, favors the borders familiar to comic strips and comic art. These familiar boxes, in this context, not only allow for adding annotation and textual references alongside (rather than in) the graphic images but also create a sense of bordering that activates the images in powerful ways. In places, the white space gutters cut dramatically against the black images to suggest the cold steel

bars and restraints that contain and constrain the black bodies populating our prisons and jails. The pairing of factual tone with powerful emotions reinforces the novel's overwhelming strength: this book expertly yet clearly explains the evolutions of policy and belief that grew alongside (the often manufactured) fears of a violent, racialized other.

Angela Davis (2005) describes the prison as “an institution deeply connected to the *maintenance* of racism.” *Race to Incarcerate* interrupts the popularly held belief that incarceration is a response to crime and instead demonstrates that the era of massive prison expansion was a response to civil rights. What is commonly sold to media consumers as the “natural” back and forth of crime and legislation is demonstrated to be the exploitation of xenophobia and the positioning of the police as enforcing agents of a hegemonic white culture. U.S. voters were taught to fear those who resisted the drug policies that were tearing apart communities, while harsh parole conditions and stripped social support budgets essentially ensured once in the system, few ever get out. Even fewer ever vote again. In July 2012, the Huffington Post reported that more than 5 million adults had been legislatively disenfranchised (McLaughlin). This is more than the balance of the many twentieth century presidential elections, including both elections that resulted in the presidencies of George W. Bush.

In order to unpack the complicated political history that subtends criminality, *Race to Incarcerate* is organized into sections named for policy eras such as “The Rise of the Tough on Crime Movement,” “The Triumph of Tough on Crime,” and “Color-Coded Justice,” with an interlude of 3 sections titled according to associated presidential term; the first of these is “Crime as Politics: The Reagan Bush Years.” By drawing connections between policy evolutions and the approving presidents and their appointed leaders the text helps to complicate the familiar republican/democrat binary and explain that not only have presidents from both parties have been complicit in the explosive growth of the prison industrial complex but also that the adversarial nature of the two party system fueled the escalation.

For example, the section entitled “Crime as Politics: The Clinton Years” juxtaposes Attorney General Janet Reno's research and advocacy against mandatory minimums against the partisan posturing that led President Clinton, in 1994, to champion the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act. This bill was sold as a “balanced approach” but served to reallocate money from social programs into the already “bloated prison system.” This novel's placing of the bill into its historical-political context shows readers how the villainization of those perceived to be “soft on crime” led a liberal champion to counter the work of his own appointed officials and support a destructive shift in policy. The criminal-legal empire is the product of political party tension and public perception.

Race to Incarcerate explains the ways that national politics build upon a legacy of systemic racism as both product and producer of incarceration, but it is conspicuously quiet on the targeting of lesbian, gay, and trans people by the criminal legal system. As explained by Joey L. Mogul, Andrea J. Ritchie, and Kay Whitlock (2011), if we are to have any meaningful discussions about democratic, productive alternatives to the prison, “the role of policing in upholding systems of gendered power relations, conventional notions of morality, and sexual conformity cannot be overlooked.” Criminality is legislated to sequester those deemed offensive to a presumed public morality. The enforcement of hegemonic gender and sex normativity is as pervasive as the marginalization of people of color. Those whose lives are intersections of profiled, othered identities, transgender women of color in particular, are even more likely to become enmeshed in the criminal legal system. As certain gender identities and certain sexual orientations are marked as deviant and aberrant, they become ostracized even within excluded communities. Discrediting a public by fragmenting, discrediting, and incarcerating are powerful tools for silencing opposition. Resistant stories and lives are effectively erased.

When students learn to view locally significant topics through multiple perspectives and weigh political import from positions outside those represented in mainstream media, they begin to understand the nuanced ways in which discourse lobbies tremendous influence over the production and reception of meaning. *Race to Incarcerate* concludes with a section, “A New Direction,” that profiles community policing, the movement of local governments towards re-entry programs, and the possibility of restorative justice. Importantly, this overview places an emphasis on the complicity and agency of each reader although it is implied more than it is stated outright. Nevertheless, the addendum/appendix section that follows the graphic text directs readers to “Write a Prisoner” and challenges readers with a specific call to activate their learning. By fostering engagement, the text becomes a valuable mechanism for demonstrating how public perceptions of criminality are tied tightly to the future of democracy.

Journaling Activity: A Pedagogy for Writing out Prisons

While the two graphic texts that I chose clearly demonstrate the intense anguish of lives destroyed and explain the political discourse that led there, students, particularly middle class, White students, can sometimes still feel removed and distanced. Analyzing community engagement projects, Linda Flower (2008) has written that in order for students to be successful in transferring abstract, academic ideas to daily, public life, they must create a space that is “both political and personal.” Students need to connect the perspectives of

others with political ideology in a way that explains both perspectives. Contemporary political discourses, as well as most mainstream news media, instead favors of a persuasive version of rhetoric that is one view versus another. Rather than account for perspectives, consumers are taught to impeach one in favor of another, and because media replicates the popular views of hegemony, media rhetoric tends to establish its truth by impeaching an other.

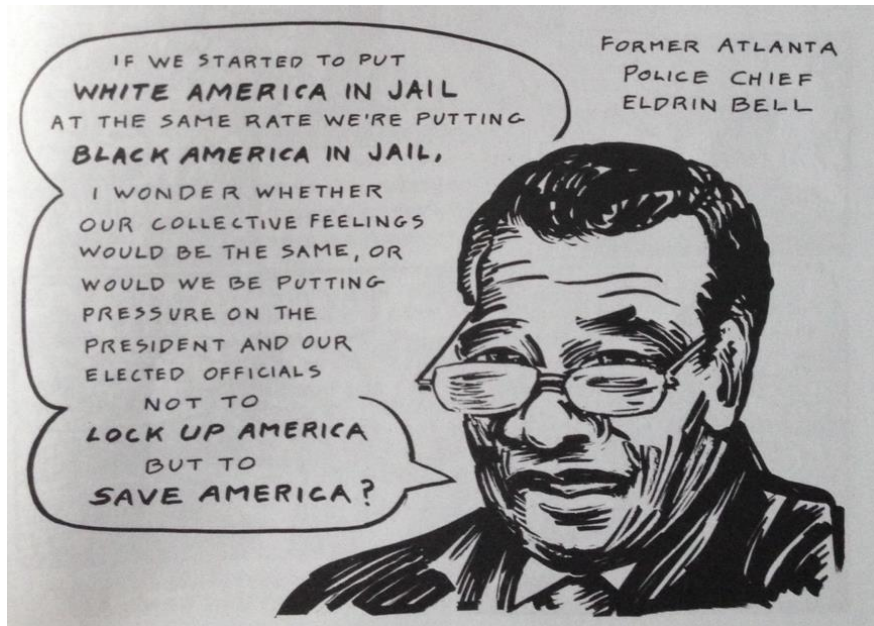


Figure 5. Racism is often unnoticed by those who benefit. *Race to Incarcerate*.

However, rhetoric teaches us that ideology and language are not deterministic and hegemony can be resisted and changed. Victor Villanueva (1992) explains that opposition to hegemony endures “when there is widespread socio-historical criticism. Voices of discontent look back to the roots of oppression and articulate the socio-historical precedents . . . The voices seek to persuade all groups that everyone’s needs could be better met if substantive changes were to take place.” Historicizing “common sense” points to the rhetorical construction and constructedness of truths held as natural and immutable. In other words, what seems to be a seamless progression of common sense ideas is revealed as the function of politicized discourse in service of dominant culture. Or, as Bruce Herzberg (1994) explains, sustained ideological critique through pedagogy is dependent on students’ ability to “transcend their own deeply ingrained belief in individualism and meritocracy.” When faced with culminating personal evidence, the familiar terms and concepts of justice, crime,

and safety that students believed to be natural and stable are revealed to be constructed and contingent.

To accommodate this challenge, I supplement reading assignments with frequent entries in a “media journal” that encourages students to put our course texts into conversation with local media reports. A variation on the familiar dialectical journal, this version asks students to use facing and opposite notebook pages as two columns where they summarize and respond using text and illustration as they see fit. On the left page, they briefly summarize, describe, or illustrate local media reports of crime or court proceedings. These are most frequently from television news, but I also accept radio and internet texts, video, and audio reports. I specifically exclude dramatizations and fictionalized stories. On the right page, I ask students to respond and to put the stories into conversation with the texts we read. As we move through the course, I ask students to add to the journal, but I also ask them to revisit past entries to build conversations from their observations. They are required to not only summarize but also to contextualize by linking events to the texts we read, to ideas and conversations shared with classmates, and, importantly, to other events that happen during the course. Often, these intersections lead students to research questions that show up in semester projects, and they often reference entries in their journals as moments when their thinking changed.

While they are required to write in the journal, I also encourage students to include illustrations. Often the freedom to draw and color in the journal, rather than being restricted to writing alone, offers students a way to process emotions (both theirs and those involved in a reported story) that their academic fluency doesn’t allow. I believe that the success of this activity is in the incremental processing that students undertake. I believe that my previous failure was in placing students who are used to be comfortable and believe their worldviews to be stable into unstable, uncomfortable spaces without adequate support. When students start to understand ideologies and start to see the ways ideology rhetorically maintains hegemony, they can feel disloyal to their family, their church, and their country. When given a means of processing these feelings and a staged process through which to validate and test new ideas, students are less apt to reject the new ways of seeing the world. This has been frequently demonstrated in students’ end of term projects.

I only assess students’ participation in the journal. I collect them periodically and record process-points for completed entries. I do provide feedback, usually in the form of questions, although the journals also have been a source for mini lessons on grammar and genre conventions. At the end of the semester, I assess the course by portfolio, and these have become the assessment mechanism for my curriculum as well. Like most, I assign a cover letter in which students explain the included assignments, but unlike most, I require that students

respond to a cover letter prompt that focuses their letter as an argument rather than merely as a self-reflection. Specifically, I ask them to explain what responsible writing “is” using their writing assignments and their journal entries as evidence. While my students can choose which of their formal assignments to include, they are required to include excerpts from the journal, and they are required to explain the choices they’ve made and the ways that the course readings guided or complicated those decisions. I gauge the effectiveness of my course, in part, through these letters.

The journaling activity has yielded exciting meta-analysis in my students’ cover letters. Previously, students largely discarded the conversations and ideas represented in their summaries and used the cover letter to describe process and style. Invention was only tangentially referenced. Since implementing the new activity and texts, students more often explain connections between the course readings and events outside the classroom. One student’s response from a recent course stands out:

I thought between my college education so far, my life experience (of all of 22 years), and my natural smarts I had a good understanding of how the world works; I didn’t, or at least not nearly as good an understanding as I thought I did. Issues like racism, sexism, homelessness and the like were topics I knew I didn’t have a lot of first-hand experience in dealing with but thought my academic career and general life experience would help me firmly understand them at the wizened old age of 22. Never did I think that I would come to find out the gap between what I thought I knew and what appears to be true would be so large, or that this revelation would come in a [composition] course . . . This seems particularly prudent given the unrest in the last couple weeks in Baltimore, resulting from the death of Freddie Gray in police custody. . . African-American’s frustration and resentment towards law enforcement, the criminal justice system, etc. stems from historical systematic racism against African-Americans and other minorities. Much of this historical systematic racism used the way policy, laws, and other documents are written as means to subjugate minorities.

The purpose of the course is to provide students with ways of thinking critically about the world around them and to give them a means to share their thoughts that demonstrates credibility and careful attention to evidence. In other words, I have designed the course to evoke questions. This student concluded his cover letter explaining his questioning process:

To be a socially responsible writer is to be aware that your work, however small or insignificant it may seem, has consequences in

the real world, and that your work helps contribute to the wider social commentary. Therefore a socially responsible writer makes an effort to ensure that contribution to the social commentary is a positive one. To do that, a socially responsible writer must be aware of what is really going on in society, they have a duty to investigate and ask questions about the society we live in, like for example why are black men massively over-represented in the prison population? Being a socially responsible writer means understanding that there is systemic injustice and societal issues in the world we live in. It also means being aware of one's own biases and the stereotypes one might hold, and working to shed those biases and stereotypes . . . What a socially responsible writer cannot do is ignore or actively deny there are not serious issues with the society we live in, and not make an effort to correct it.

As they write and discuss, students start to recognize the contradictions that are tearing at our public sphere, and, more importantly, they begin to see themselves as *participating* in public discourse rather than practicing it.

Conclusion: What's Next?

The addition of the two graphic novels and the journaling activity has improved my course in ways that far exceeded my expectations. Students are writing more cohesive, engaged essays, and they report applying their ideas outside of the class. Some students have even joined organizations (both on and off campus) that continue conversations about the language of social justice. I am now planning applications of this curriculum for other courses, and I am considering ways to adapt the curriculum to incorporate mixed media and web technologies. The use of illustrations has limited journals to “pen and paper” texts rather than online spaces as most of my students are not comfortable drawing online. They believe that sketching or “scribbling” in notebooks is private and can be done by anyone; however, they believe that opening a program and using tools to illustrate online makes the work somehow more permanent and less private, even on a secure course management website. While this legitimacy could help to validate their work as participation in a larger conversation, it also can shut down some students who feel their artistry inadequate for shared space. As technology proliferates, I believe these barriers will soften allowing illustrations to be done online with little resistance.

In the documentary film *Visions of Abolition*, Angela Davis and Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2011) call for a political ideology of prison abolition that is nuanced and multifaceted. Rather than attempting to abruptly reverse the deep history of racist exclusion with a single vote, they suggest education and

incremental moves towards the deconstruction of mass incarceration and the reinventing of an authentic democracy. Our composition classrooms have a significant role to play in developing and maintaining a critical public. They can be spaces where students are both simultaneously safe to process new ways of thinking and supported in that thinking with readings and discussions that provide new perspectives. Embracing the visual media that many students use away from school bridges the academic world with the world outside, and students become community members rather than community observers. As former senator Bill Bradley (2012) said, democracy “starts with one person. And we simply have to understand democracy is not a vicarious experience. And in the Internet age, apathy should not be an option.” Through reading and learning that are initially unfamiliar and uncomfortable, our students learn citizenship as a process of participation and start to understand that it is up to them whether or not we tax our citizens with the very real “costs” of incarceration.

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