

Spring 2018 Canterbury Proposal:

**Mass Incarceration in Literature: To What
Extent Can Literature Capture the Injustice
of Mass Incarceration and What is the
Potential Impact on Future Reform?
An Analysis of *Beloved*, *Joe Turner's Come
and Gone*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and *King
Hedley II***

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Project Proposal

What role does literature that discusses themes of mass incarceration in the United States play in the fight for reform and the bringing about the end of this systemic oppression? In comparing these texts to contemporary documents and first-hand accounts of each time period, how closely does the literature reflect the lived experiences?

“But there is one way in this country in which all men are created equal- there is one human institution that makes a pauper the equal of a Rockefeller, the stupid man the equal of an Einstein, and the ignorant man the equal of any college president. That institution gentlemen, is a court. It can be the Supreme Court of the United States or the humblest JP court in the land, or this honourable court which you serve. Our courts have their faults as does any human institution, but in this country our courts are the great levelers, and in our courts all men are created equal” - Atticus Finch, *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee

This quote, from the infamous court scene in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, is the perfect place to begin this proposal. Why? Well, to this day, when I hear the word “incarceration” I think of *To Kill a Mockingbird*'s Tom Robinson. Perhaps Harper Lee's novel was the most memorable part of 8th grade, but it seems far more likely that the story of Tom Robinson has stayed with me all of these years, because of its acute critique of the United States' criminal justice system. The character of Tom Robinson has come to represent, in many ways, the lived experience of our unjust court system and mass incarceration in the United States. What Atticus has described above is the expectation, but sadly, not the reality of our legal system. It is that disparity between expectation and reality that has maintained Tom Robinson as an example of the continued oppression of African Americans through different means of incarceration. While it may take different shapes and names - slavery, chain gangs, disenfranchisement, segregation, Jim Crow, mass incarceration - these acts of imprisonment and confinement have plagued African Americans since the first enslaved Africans arrived in Virginia in 1619. Evidence of this continued oppression's relevance becomes apparent upon an examination of literature and cultural texts that reflect, attack, and ruminate on the pain and suffering caused by this incarceration. In the past two years, I have found a desire to investigate institutional racism in the United States and the impact of modern oppression and incarceration on the most structurally

vulnerable populations in the US. In particular, I hope that in examining texts that deal with different forms of incarcerations, I can begin to further explain the power of literature in the needed reform of such institutions, while also gauging to what extent these cultural products accurately reflect the lived experiences of people who experience this systemic violence. This examination will center around the texts *Beloved*, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and *King Hedley II*.

It seems only fitting to begin the discussion of incarceration with the inciting moment, the enslavement of Africans in the US. While this may seem like an odd place to begin the discussion of mass incarceration, lots of scholarship has been able to illustrate that mass incarceration today is merely a new form of slavery; the most notable being Angela Davis's *Are Prisons Obsolete?* and Dennis Child's *Slaves of the State: Black Incarceration from the Chain Gang to the Penitentiary*. I want to build on this ongoing discussion through the vehicle of Toni Morrison's critically-acclaimed neo-slave narrative, *Beloved*. Using slave narratives that were collected during and after what we consider "traditional" slavery in the US, I want to see to what extent Morrison was able to capture the experiences of those enslaved Africans who endured the horrors of slavery. Doing so will require a great deal of primary document procurement and a careful analysis of first-hand accounts of both the enslaved people themselves and the people who upheld the system of oppression. Furthermore, examining the reception of Morrison's novel, and the particular critique she is making will help shed light on to what extent her novel contributed to reform on the issue of inequality.

While *Beloved* will set the stage for the project, as well as act as the platform through which I will establish the link between slavery and mass incarceration, August Wilson's *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* will shed light on a less frequently discussed version of incarceration

in US history - chain gangs. *Joe Turner* is one of the ten plays Wilson wrote as a part of an ongoing abolition project. Wilson's mission to shed light on the changing name and face of slavery was inspired by the 1980's War on Drugs, which is a sentiment reflected in the documentary *13th*, (this is a visual text I will be returning to shortly). His main character, Herald Loomis, becomes a representation of any and all enslaved people during and following the Civil War. His loss of identity reflects the experience of he and his peers' loss of self in the wake of being turned into glorified farm tools. Joe Turner, a fictionalized depiction of former Tennessee governor's brother Joe Turney, stripped Loomis of his personhood for seven years, and despite the four years since Loomis' release, he has yet to find himself again in the wake of that dehumanization. While his hands may no longer be physically bound by chains, his mind is still shackled to the man who only longed to be free. Now that he is freed, he can't seem to escape his enslaved mindset. Using Loomis as a point of comparison, I will juxtapose his experience as a member of a chain gang with primary documents and first-hand accounts of others who suffered a similar fate. The visual text *Slavery by Another Name* will provide additional context that will both solidify the connection between chain gangs and incarceration, as well as help determine to what extent *Joe Turner* reflects the lived experiences of those who were incarcerated by this form of oppression. Like *Beloved*, the reception of *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, the frequency of which it is performed, and the feedback it received will be telling as to its ability to function as an effective literary protest against incarceration.

As I mentioned above, *To Kill a Mockingbird* has a sentimental importance to me, but its inclusion in this project goes far beyond fond memories. Harper Lee's novel is a complicated examination of race, class, gender in a small Alabama town during the height of segregation and Jim Crow. Not only is Tom Robinson convicted and imprisoned for a crime he did not commit,

he dies at the hands of institutional racism during a failed prison escape after being shot repeatedly by guards. Tom Robinson's time spent in jail, and his apparent innocence, becomes an important example of an African American man being failed by our "justice" system. Though the novel takes place in 1935, I would like to compare Tom Robinson's experience to both African American men during that time period, in addition to comparing it to the modern rates at which we find innocent black men convicted of crimes they did not commit. I plan to use statistics and stories collected from The Innocence Project as a point of comparison. Another important element of the Jim Crow South was the prevalence of lynchings. Though this is not incarceration in the traditional way it has been defined, it is arguable that African American men were psychologically incarcerated by fear of lynching mobs, not unlike the one that Atticus barely prevents from taking Tom. By examining *To Kill a Mockingbird* for its connection to incarceration and the still existent reality of unjust courts, it will become apparent if Lee, a white woman, accurately captured the experience of incarceration in the 1930's and today. By utilizing first-hand accounts, incarceration data, statistics on lynchings, and the controversy that still surrounds the novel, I will be able to determine how effective this literary text is in creating measurable action against incarceration.

Written by the same playwright as *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, *King Hedley II* is another one of August Wilson's plays that aims to examine the experience of incarceration in the US. Whereas *Joe Turner* was set during Reconstruction, *Hedley* depicts incarceration in the 1980's, during the War on Drugs. It is during this analysis that I will lean on the previously mentioned visual text, *13th*. This film depicts the severity of mass incarceration in the US. Of the US Prison System's more than 2 million prisoners, 40.2% of them are African American men (DuVernay). This statistic becomes even more shocking when you consider that of the US's total

population, only 6.5% of the total population is African American men (DuVernay). These numbers speak to an extreme over-representation of black men in our prison system, as well as criticize our government officials' past and current policy choices that have created this perfect storm for modern enslavement. Written and performed years before the documentary, August Wilson's play presents a similar critique of the injustices of our legal system. *King Hedley II* follows King Hedley, a newly-released convict who has been subjected to the US prison system. *King Hedley II* is essential to this discussion on race, racism, and incarceration for two reasons: 1. It is the most modern of the four main literary texts, therefore, it represents the most recent reality of incarceration and enslavement; 2. The play's main character will be essential in analyzing the intersectionality of this issue of incarceration, illustrated by a comparison of Tom Robinson and King Hedley, two very different men subjected to the same system. My hope is through supplement material, including testimonials, interviews, and quotes from those affected by the War on Drugs, I will demonstrate Wilson's ability to bring to life the lived experiences on the stage. Additionally, the comparison of Tom Robinson and King Hedley will demonstrate the intersections of identity that influence different lived experiences of incarceration, and therefore, the potential impact of the text on reform.

In conclusion, I think that we are at a juncture in our society. Right now, in the wake of political chaos and cultural upheaval, this is a critical moment in our history where change is afoot. However, there will be no change if there is not action. I hope that in examining the impact of incarceration literature and its ability to inspire reform, by the project's end I want to begin brainstorming ways of improving our curriculum, at all grades levels, to be more inclusive of diverse experiences, more holistic in its presentation of past injustices, and more infused with the values of social justice, respect, tolerance, and empathy. This will only be possible once there

is a clear understanding of the depth and breadth of these incarcerated experiences, which have been left voiceless for too long. My hope is that an analysis of these literary texts that embody these experiences will allow for a centering of these marginalized and institutionally oppressed groups, while also posing the question of what these texts can do in this revived push for reform.

My goals for this project are as follows:

- Present mass incarceration, and its changing name and face, as a reality in the United States
- Provide an attentive care while critically examining the strength, power, and limits of incarceration literature
- Measure to what degree literature of this nature can accurately reflect the lived experiences of those who experience mass incarceration today, and those who experienced past forms of incarceration. Doing this will require an examination of the historical record and a juxtaposition to literature representative of the said time frame.
- Plan and brainstorm ways to introduce incarceration literature to the classroom in an attempt to shed light on the issues that still impact a large portion of our population.
 - Waiting until college to learn about the prevalence of mass incarceration is too late!
- Bring the historically voiceless and the institutionally silenced to the center of this discussion of incarceration and needed reform
- Personally, I hope to grow as a writer, learn more about these systems of oppression, challenge myself as a researcher, and pursue my passion for social justice.
- By the project's end, I hope to reaffirm my desire to pursue graduate studies in English and move one step closer to being an English professor.

Timeline

Summer 2018

- Read all source material
- Take detailed notes on the literary texts that will be at the center of this discussion
 - *Beloved*
 - *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*
 - *King Hedley II*
 - *To Kill a Mockingbird*
- Begin individual examinations and analyses of each of the texts and discover the ways they interact
- Do additional research on the reality of incarceration
 - Primary source procurement and analysis
 - Historical context research
 - Finding visual texts to watch, analyze, and interpret
- Complete at least 30 typed-pages of research
 - 10 pages per month (June, July, August)
 - Very reasonable pace
- Register for Facing Race Conference and National Race Amity Conference

Fall 2018

- August/September, finalize a full draft of the paper
- October, submit it to Sigma Tau Delta Conference
- Register for Sigma Tau Delta Conference

Winter 2019

- March/April, attend Sigma Tau Delta Conference
- Take comments from conference into consideration to complete final project

Spring 2019

- Make any final edits to the paper for Canterbury Fellowship presentation
- Present at the Reception

Budget

Books:

• <i>New Jim Crow</i>	\$14
• <i>King Hedley II</i>	\$11
• <i>Joe Turner's Come and Gone</i>	\$13
• <i>To Kill a Mockingbird</i>	\$9
• <i>Beloved</i>	\$10
• <i>Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass</i>	\$2
• <i>The Awkward Thoughts of W. Kamau Bell</i>	\$16
• <i>Are Prisons Obsolete?</i>	\$11
• <i>Black Incarceration from the Chain Gang to Penitentiary</i>	\$23
• <i>Writing my Wrongs: Life, Death, and Redemption</i>	\$6
• <i>Scenes of Subjection</i>	\$34
• <i>In the Wake: On Blackness and Being</i>	\$18
• Additional Books	\$130

Book Total: \$300

Conferences:

- Facing Race Conference: \$170/night (2 nights) + \$185 Registration Fee
- National Race Amity Conference: \$129 per night, Standard Queen, single/double occupancy plus taxes + Registration Fee (TBA)
- Sigma Tau Delta Conference: \$700
 - *The additional cost of flights as all of these conferences are out of state, will be not be an issue as I have accumulated plenty of rewards miles. This is not an additional expenditure to consider.

Conference Total: \$1700

Overall Budget: \$2000

Conference Information

- **Facing Race, November 8 to 10, 2018**
 - Facing Race is a national conference that is presented by Race Forward: The Center for Racial Justice Innovation. It is a unique collaborative space for racial justice movement making.
 - Facing Race is the largest multiracial, inter-generational gathering for organizers, educators, creatives and other leaders.
 - Facing Race offers local communities unprecedented access to information and resources on racial equity. It includes over 70 workshops and access to over 180 presenters. The conference has hosted near 2,000 attendees from all over the world. Previous Facing Race National Conferences have been held in Atlanta, Baltimore, Berkeley, Chicago, Dallas, Oakland and New York.
 - **My hope is that in attending this conference, through the small group discussions, I will become even more immersed in the issues of race, racism, and discrimination that were the inspiration for this project. By the time I would be attending, I plan to have my paper written, so this would be particularly helpful in witnessing effective ways to talk about race and racism, considering the overall goal is to find ways to use literature for reform and impacting change in the classroom.**
- **National Race Amity Conference: November 15 to 16, 2018**
 - The National Race Amity Conference offers participants positive, focused opportunities for intimate discussion circles, interactive panels, and informative sessions on a variety of topics central to the main theme of race amity in the United States.
 - The National Race Amity Conference is organized around presentations in the arts, business, community service, education, entertainment, government, media communications, law, spirituality, and sports. Unlike large scale national conferences where “small” breakout sessions can number 75 participants or more, Race Amity breakout sessions usually involved 20 to 35 participants. This smaller group approach offers learning opportunities in group settings that are more conducive to greater sharing and understanding. The conference offers a very good cost value as all meals are included in registration.
 - **My goal for attending the National Race Amity Conference is the same as the Facing Race Conference. I hope to further engage in these issues and learn the most effective ways to talk about an issue that makes some people uncomfortable. Rather than shy away from that discomfort, this conference will illustrate additional ways to begin and continue this essential conversation.**
- **Sigma Tau Delta Conference: March/April 2019**
 - **As a member of Sigma Tau Delta, my hope is to attend this conference and to present the paper that will be the product of this proposal. I hope to engage with fellow scholars, receive useful feedback for my paper, and become more invested in my Sigma Tau Delta membership.**

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