

# RADICAL TEACHER

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*Teaching Note*

## Write Back Soon: Mass Incarceration and “Writing Intensive” Vulnerability

by Ianna Hawkins Owen



**A**t a booth in Dolores Park for the Trans March during the summer of 2018, my friend and I struggled to write postcards on the fly to incarcerated folks. The booth was run by volunteers from Black and Pink, a prison abolition organization that matches queer and trans people behind bars with pen pals on the outside. I only had experience writing to someone I knew personally. What did I have to say of consequence or comfort to a total stranger, despite the bonds of affinity drawing their address and my body to the same table? I was surely overthinking it. Instead, I colored in a unicorn with the intensity of the hapless. My friend stared at her card full of half starts.

Throughout that typically chilly Bay Area summer, I was turning over in my mind the problem of satisfying the “writing intensive” designation of my new undergraduate seminar, “Black Writing To/From/About Prison.” I struggled to come up with a way to make the course’s mandated four papers, or 20-pages of writing, outward facing—an orientation not dictated by the curriculum committee but, rather, by my own flagging optimism. I conceived of the papers as letters but wondered how to do this without succumbing to the trap of reducing the subjects of the class, incarcerated folk and the system that feeds on them, to easy objects for “diversifying” the intellectual project of English courses at a predominantly white and elite northeast institution and nothing more.

There are many models, for sure, of attempting to ensure that those inside and those outside are sharing information instead of merely extracting personal stories and banking information. But, suspicious of empathy projects since reading Saidiya Hartman’s *Scenes of Subjection*, yet constantly entangled with them, I wasn’t sure there was a way that I could redirect those energies in a single semester as a relatively new teacher working on a new course. Where would those stories go? What would my students do with what they took? How long would it live? How soon would it be forgotten?

I began to think about the role of letter-writing in student lives. Maybe it started as notes in class and evolved into emails, text messages, snapchats. The mode of communication might be more condensed but the desire for—and the kernel of—written contact to people we can be our whole selves with is a regular part of our lives. What if I asked students to write to people they already talk to all the time? Friends, family, other loved ones? There is, to be sure, a certain awkwardness in being directed to make an extended point about a particular topic and knowing that others (not addressed) will read it, but it is not without precedent.

Open letters are a mainstay of African American literature -- perhaps the most well-known of which is Martin Luther King, Jr.’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” which addresses several clergymen who condemned the pace of the civil rights movement as “too fast.” He takes on these addressees as a means of reaching his true audience of concern: a broader mass of white moderates. Indeed, he writes, rather than the Klu Klux Klan, “[s]hallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will. Lukewarm acceptance is much more bewildering than

outright rejection” (King, Jr. 97). Another long-standing and powerful example of the open letter is James Baldwin’s “My Dungeon Shook,” in which Baldwin writes to his nephew to explain the problem of race in America in accessible terms. Pitched at a youth, the letter accomplishes its goal of reaching liberal white folk who might require engagement at an elementary level but would balk at being spoken to directly in such a manner. Baldwin concludes his letter by telling young James that it is not the two of them who are imprisoned by race in America but, actually, “them,” his eavesdroppers, who must free themselves (Baldwin 10).

The open letter form allows for both the intimate engagement of individual, familiar contact and the deft inclusion of targeted eavesdroppers in order to raise the consciousness of listeners and affirm the value of personal relationships. And so, in this way, students satisfied the college’s writing intensive requirement with me by writing letters with purpose to people that they knew in order to facilitate a felt relationship to the course topic between themselves and another. To take the resources of the classroom and touch people predisposed to hear what they had to say—even if the topic were uncomfortable, unsettling, and implicating.

The letter form allowed me to pursue other writing enhancement objectives including observing comprehension of course material; encouraging curatorial skills in selecting texts for reference; engaging in application of course material to students’ lives, the lives of people they know, and the region in which they live; and nurturing creative thinking skills. The course material itself is a wide ranging and eclectic mix of genres and voices on the problem of mass incarceration. Students read poetry and short stories by Terrance Hayes, Alexis Pauline Gumbs, Tèa Mutonji, and Jamel Brinkley; first person testimonies from *Inside this Place, Not of It: Narratives from Women’s Prisons*, *Captive Genders: Trans Embodiment and the Prison Industrial Complex*, and *Hell is a Very Small Place: Voices from Solitary Confinement*; memoirs like *Assata* and *Angels with Dirty Faces*; scholarship from researchers like Nikki Jones, Michelle Alexander, Victor Rios, Angela Davis, Ruth Wilson Gilmore, Andrea Ritchie, and Saidiya Hartman; and they viewed documentaries like *Free CeCe* and *The Last Graduation*.

Below are the prompts for the four letters during the first year of instruction.

### **Prompt for Letter #1**

*In this letter write to someone you know personally about the history and structure of prisons in the United States. What are the objectives of this institution? Have they shifted over time? What are the effects of this institution? Please also address one of the following themes: rhetoric, time, or habituation. This is the first of four letters written to the person you choose. This letter is meant to help them to understand that there is something called a “prison industrial complex” operating in the United States today.*

## Prompt for Letter #2

*In this letter write to someone you know personally about how both race and gender are integral factors in mass incarceration in the United States. How are these communities impacted by this system--inside and out? How have particular communities come to be targeted by this system? Please also address one of the following themes: sexuality, disability, or citizenship. This is the second of four letters written to the person you chose. This letter is meant to help them to understand the intersectional reach of the prison industrial complex in the United States today.*

## Prompt for Letter #3

*In this letter write to someone you know personally about any aspect of mass incarceration in the United States you have not yet addressed with them. Be clear about why you make the choice you make. Please also address one of the following themes (but do not make it the center of your letter): memoir, art, political engagement, or education. This is the third of four letters written to the person you chose. This letter's topic is open to you. This letter is meant to help them to understand an aspect of your choice about the prison industrial complex in the United States today.*

## Prompt for Letter #4

*This is the last of your letters written to the person you chose. This letter is meant to give you space to figure out what to do with all that you have learned and, rather than hold that alone, reach out to someone who matters to you about how to tackle one small piece of the larger project of prison abolition in the United States today.*

*In this letter ask the addressee to help you start a prison abolition organization in Williamstown (or ask their advice about your idea if they are not local). What is your current understanding of the prison industrial complex? What aspect of the system are you challenging? Why does that aspect speak to you or matter to you? What is your organization's goal? Why? What is the organization's strategy/how does it accomplish its goals? Which organizational models are (or are not) useful to you in the design process? Why would your friend want to collaborate with you on this (or how might their perspective on your idea help you to grow it)? You may start a new organization or found a chapter of an existing organization. If founding a chapter, you must discuss how this organization's design would be modified/adapted to succeed in the area.*

They chose to write to grandparents, dorm-mates, best friends, neighbors back home, as well as siblings in other countries and contexts than this one. In each letter, student writers negotiated acts of translation between course material and personal habits of speech, reinterpretation of memories held in common, or revelations about private experiences hitherto undisclosed. The most elegant letters

loosened the grip of the traditional five-paragraph essay's hold on their voice and experimented creatively with the use of metaphor and simile to generate lasting images, followed the thread of their thoughts, and structured their letters according to the individual logic of their specific relationships to their addressees.

Those letters that opened themselves up to the vulnerability of processing their own personal experiences and emotions in public achieved the greatest persuasiveness. Student letters that had trouble relinquishing the format of the traditional college essay were the most stiff, least effective letters. This is not surprising given that so many people are trained from a young age not to use "I"—let alone to allow feeling to intrude upon the craft of writing and deepen the impact of their words.

Navigating the openness of the letter, students provided a smidge more background to their inside references so that the outside reader (the eavesdropper rendering the letter "open") could follow along without getting bogged down in unnecessary detail. The hybridity of the assignment showed up on the footnotes page, where students could go into more technical detail about their citations and resources without interrupting the flow of the connection and mutual intelligibility they worked to establish with their loved one.

I share this assignment structure as one possibility for navigating teaching open-theme college writing courses, which ideally should be both challenging and rewarding for student, teacher and community alike. I close with a portion of a teaching eval in which one of the few upperclassmen in the course wrote:

*Even though this was a 100 level, I found it challenged me (more than many of my upper level courses) because it asked me to do something we are rarely asked to do in the academy—merge the personal and the political. In theory I loved this womanist concept, but in practice I had no clue how to do this and I was nervous, so thank you for forcing me to self-reflect/introspect and tap into my creativity!*

In proposing this course and, now, preparing to teach it for a second time, my goal has been to mobilize writing assignments as strategies that can exceed the walls of the elite New England classroom—tenderly touching the friends and families, using their kinship and mutual trust to politicize vulnerability in writing and to turn more hearts and more resources toward the long project of freedom for all people.

## Works Cited

- Baldwin, James. "My Dungeon Shook," *The Fire Next Time*. Vintage International, 1993.
- King, Jr. Martin Luther. "Letter from Birmingham Jail," *Why We Can't Wait*. Signet Classics, 2000.



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