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The American Nightmare: Land of the Incarcerated

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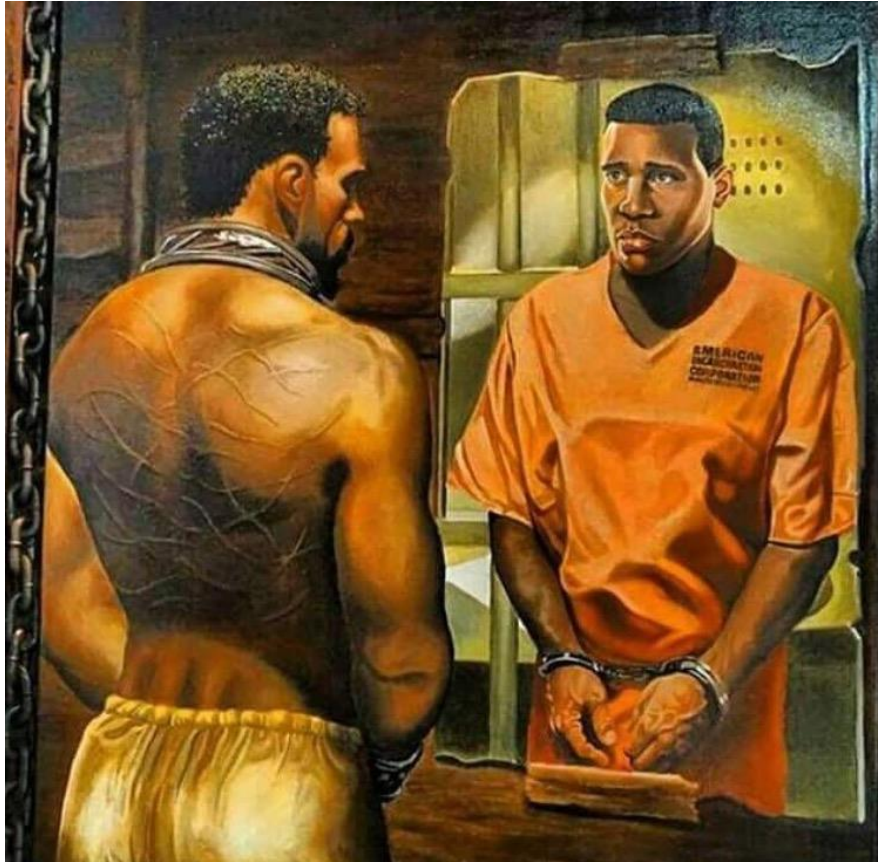
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The American Nightmare: Land of the Incarcerated

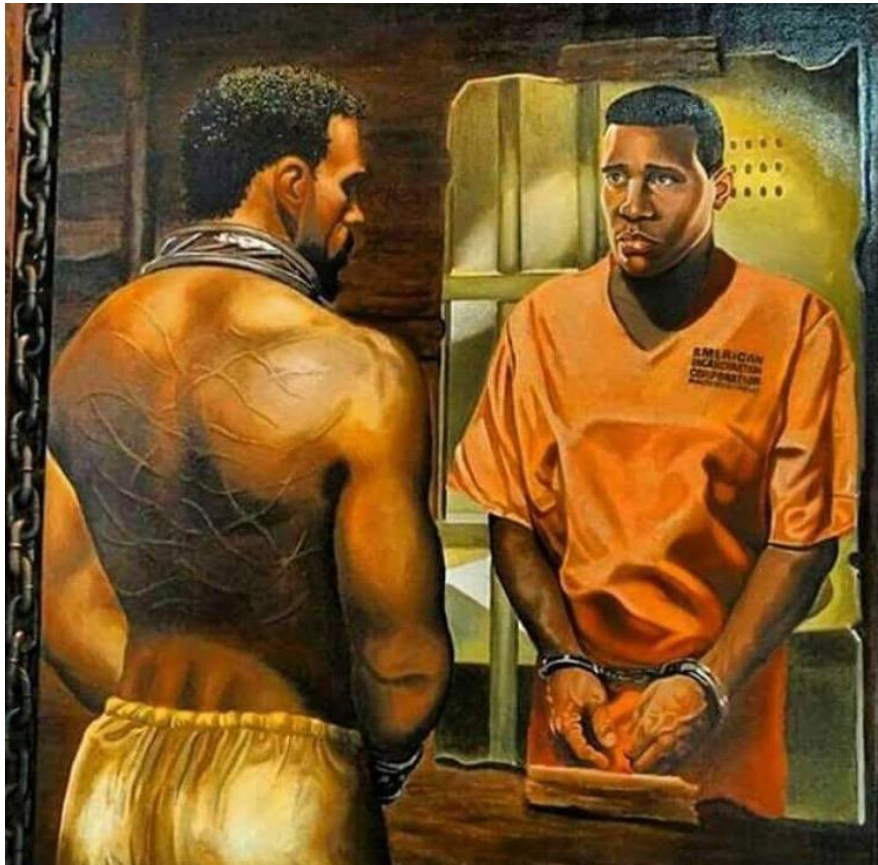


By Jamara Bernard

Senior Capstone

Division of the Humanities and Communication

Spring 2016



Artwork by Michael D'Antuano

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Spring 2016

Table of Contents

Dedication/Acknowledgements

Capstone proposal.....	1
P.I.C.....	3
War on Drugs.....	4
3 Strikes.....	6
Mass Incarceration.....	8
Ode to the Black Man Incarcerated.....	10
Reflective Essay.....	12
Synthesis Essay.....	17
Resume.....	22

Dedications/ Acknowledgements

I would like to dedicate my work to the late De'juan Bell, you will never be forgotten rest in paradise best friend.

I would like to thank each and every person that took the time to encourage me and give constructive criticism so that I could reach my full potential.

Special thank you to Diana Garcia, Lee Ritscher, Meghan O'Donnell, and my family and friends for all the support. I truly appreciate you all.

Capstone Proposal

Provide your name and identify your area of concentration

1. Jamara Bernard, my concentration is Creative Writing and Social Action

2. **Project Description:** Provide a 50-75 word description of your project idea and what form the project will take. If you are a Creative Writing and Social Action Concentration student, specifically describe what genre you will produce (poetry, creative non-fiction etc.) and what social action issue you are engaging.

2. I will be producing a portfolio of poetry. My portfolio will consist of pieces that describe the conditions within the prison systems along with the incarceration rate of African Americans. I am engaging in the social action issue of systems of oppression and institutional racism. The poems will primarily be free verse but still targeting themes of race and gender.

3. **Alignment with Common Theme:** Provide a concise overview of your project's direct alignment with this semester's shared theme of inquiry. 3. My project will directly align with the theme of the course focusing on race and the incarceration rate of African Americans ages 18-24

4. **Purpose:** What is your project's primary purpose? For example, do you aspire to inform or enlighten? To persuade? To contribute to responsible decision making? Some of each?

4. I would like to inform people of these issues and how it is of great importance. I want to use this project as a platform because social action writing is about making people not only think but to act as well.

5. **Format Rationale:** Provide a brief rationale for your selected format. How will using your chosen format help you fulfill your project's purpose(s)?

5. This specific format will allow me to fulfill the project's purpose in that it will grab attention but still have meaningful content that correlates with the capstone theme. This specific format will help me to hone into my talents and create writings which can be used in future endeavors.

6. **Capstone Title:** What is your project's working title?

6. The American Nightmare: Land of the Incarcerated

7. **Working Summary:** Provide a one-paragraph working summary of your project.

7. My project will focus on the incarceration rate in African American men. With extensive research on the matter I will gain the knowledge needed to write poetry in a conscious manner. This collection of poems will inform the audience of pressing issues that black males face throughout their lives. It will shed light on the systems of oppression that are holding these men behind bars. How justice is just an idea rather than a reality for many of these men.

8. **Expectations:** Articulate as clearly as possible the specific expectations associated with your chosen project, including a detailed account of all deliverables. Be sure to align the project

expectations with the appropriate assessment criteria and include your understanding of all documentation requirements associated with the project.

8. Some of the expectations associated with my project include an in depth understanding of the topic of inquiry, displaying a unique voice, provides a new look or contribution of topic, makes use of interdisciplinary skillsets within HCOM, and completed in a timely manner.

9. Specific Skills Required: Demonstrate specifically competency in the technical skills needed to complete the project in the proposed format described and how you already have developed them. Be specific! For example, if you have chosen a digital story as the format for your creative project, how did you develop the skills needed to complete a digital story? Did you successfully complete Latina Life Stories? How did you develop competency in using editing software?

9. I have developed the skillsets to complete a creative writing portfolio through several courses within my creative writing and social action concentration one of which was an advanced course. This will be my fourth consecutive time creating a portfolio of my poetry. I developed the skills I need to do so yet again, I also have experience in research and turning my findings into poetry. Poetry that is meaningful and social action driven so that I can inform my audience in a captivating way.

10. Next Steps: What steps will you need to take to meet your project's expectations, including preparation of all required deliverables? (Be as specific as possible)

10. I will need to first begin by focusing my topic, in depth research of topic, complete my creative process, and go through revisions of pieces. I will discuss elements of design and craft, audience and purpose, the critical and creative process.

11. Timeline: Provide a detailed (and realistic) timeline for completion of each step required to meet the project's expectations.

11. I would say I can complete 2 poems written by March 6 then another 2 by March 21. Then spend time doing revisions until March 30. 2 More poems will be written around April 12 so I'll need about another week of revisions. The remainder of time will be spent tuning up my works as well as writing a cover essay along with the final essay. Getting feedback and revision of the essays and piecing the entire project together will be the final steps, so I would say the date would be around May 16th

P.I.C.

The Prison Industrial Complex

Is complex enough to revive what only faked its death, slavery.

For the 13th amendment proves just that

Involuntary servitude isn't permitted

Until malicious behavior needs punishment

Slavery still exists.

Racism still exists.

The people are blinded

Prisoners are not people but "evildoers"

Commit the crime, do the time

They say.

They say it is self-inflicted

Never taking into account the circumstances

Black males a target in areas poverty stricken

Plucked away from the ghettos, like their ancestors were snatched from the Mother Land.

Like slaves being stripped of their names, raped of pure identity

America does not love them, America loves

Power, money, control, greed, narcissism

Survival of the fittest, yet unfit to survive

Barely making a living off dimes

Selling drugs to get

War on Drugs

Selling drugs, the Underground Railroad to escape poverty.

Nothing more than a Band-Aid for a systematic wound

Broken homes and broken children

Fall victim to the illusion of quick riches

Since schools expect the least

Big surprise students fail academically

No funds, no resources

Kids are lucky if they barely make it out the trenches of destitute lives

Nixon himself made the declaration

Of a War which began 4 decades ago and has yet to end

Policing blacks at liquor store corners

Circling blocks so much it becomes clock work

Reasonable cause is now people minding their business

Disrupt neighborhoods due to suspicion

Racial bias to up stats and monetary gain

Every 21 seconds cops

Make an easy arrest for simple possession

Rather than for violent offences

Black skin threatens

Smuggling illegal substances

The DEA created occupations only to have the community in havoc,

Uneducated so they're chasing the dragon.

Planting them on urban soil

No good comes from it, only growth seen in prison populations

There's more drug use in the suburbs and no regulations

Everything is fine when black men are in cages despite ages

Pure disgrace and disgust

Dismantling injustice is a must

War never granted solutions, far too much death

And even more confusion

Drug abuse hasn't reduced since recreational use

Marijuana isn't nothing new

Even when prescribed blacks can still serve time

But pharmaceuticals make millions by pushing pills

That only prolong illness

There's need for a strong remedy

3 Strikes

1, 2, 3 strikes you're out and no this isn't a game

Forced participants play puppets, guess whose controlling strings.

The profiteer works behind the curtain

Retaining about 1.6 million in prison

The rest pawns for entertainment, scoring for the masses

Then massa pays him a fraction, 3/4ths of the dollar

The 3 strike laws

Set in place with the delusion of decreasing delinquency

Cracking down on blacks with proficiency

And nonstop infantry

The type of life blacks know from infancy

Born into racial disparity

Maneuvering through criminal injustice, like dodgeball on the playground

Prejudice doesn't play around

When it hits you, you're dumbfounded

Guns, knives, and black fists seen as deadly weapons

No injuries to anyone yet several convictions, based off insubstantial evidence

A mere burglary crime is a 3rd strike

Robs men of life, locked away for good

Unable to pay \$20,000 in fines, a poor man paid in time

15 years of his life, this isn't right

Brainwashing the public

To cling to ideas rather than truths

Visionless to the reality

It's obscured by individual action

Observations of prisons overcapacity

Stacking bodies high, doubling up bunk beds

It's blasphemy

The system is repetitive

We must inject sedatives

To stop it in its tracks, take a step back

Recidivism

Pure Vandalism, religiously tarnish lives

Day by day just rotting away

Due to *unethical cause*

Affecting black families

For generations to come

Kids aiming to be like the fathers they've never had

Suited up in uniform

Since orange is the new black

Mass Incarceration

One in three black men will go to prison
Branded with numbers like barcodes on objects
Programmed in the system, forever unable to decode
Swallowed whole in a never-ending loop of déjà vu
Waking up in a prison nightmare
Dreaming of hope

Overcrowded men suppressed by the system
Four dead from a drunk driver
And if you're rich enough,
claim affluenza, Or mental illness
Multiple laws broken, nothing but a slap on the wrist
Plaxico shot himself in the leg and served two years

According to society, these black men
Are criminals, not individuals
Never seeing the fruits of their labor
These men take perpetual beatings
No healthcare/Lashing
No employment /Lashing
No voting rights /Lashing
No student loans/Lashing
No housing/Lashing

Collateral damage, unfathomable
Communities suffer
Families suffer

Money speaks so loud
Children in the ghettos hear echoes
Ringing, ringing
Single mothers answering collect calls
Collecting debt, spending what isn't there

But profits are to be made
Slave labor pays corporations well
Men detained in captivity
Have no choice but obey

Work for close to nothing
Manufacturing all kinds of materials
Furniture, license plates, jeans, even processed meats
Everything from computer programs to leather restraints
Everything from dentures to lingerie
Earning 2 dollars a day

Private businesses make billions
Ranging from Dial soap to AT&T
Nothing but the sweet smell of cookies
Making profits off billions. Instead of home sweet home
It's home sweet prison

Ode to the Black Man Incarcerated

Father, Son, Husband, Brother, Cousin,
You are not the scum of the earth nor an animal to be displayed
Not the villain people make you out to be
For you are human, made up of flesh and the stars of the universe
Gentle eyes, scruffy chin, rough chiseled hands, broad shoulders
You have the same fears, desires, aspirations
You hurt. Bleed. Feel. Love.

We love you, and I mean that with every pound of my flesh
With every letter written, every personal visit, every collect call
We put the little extra money we have on your books
And count down the days 'til your release
1,825 more days of tears
Tattooed on your face.
We forgive you for being caught up in the chewing cycle,
Just to be spit out into a place you were never meant to return to.
We all pay the price while America walks all over you.
America waits and watches
Preying on you while you pray to God

Black skin is a get into jail free card,
The only time black hands are held is when cuffed behind their backs
You know the definition of punishment all too well
Confined in a 9 by 12 jail cell
Boxed in tight, the air's thin
Human rights have been denied or given in scarce supply

Inequality present on absurd levels
Time and punishment don't seem to correlate.
White crime receives less time white collar crooks
Who steal millions from investors,
Are less likely to be disciplined or
Even placed in maximum security facilities.
A black man steals a hammer, third strike,
One hammer to pound a nail in the wall. He gets five years.

There is nothing quite like the black experience.

Despite odds you still show resilience.
Deconstructing inferences of ignorance.
Proven victorious over Harvard undergraduates.

You have much more to give than society can see,
Malnourished souls weep just as the caged bird sings,
Sings these songs of freedom.

Reflective Essay

The XIII amendment states "Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction." The U.S. Constitution explicitly abolished slavery; however, it did permit punishment for crime. While it does not overtly refer to any race specifically, historically African-Americans suffer in a magnitude of ways. After slavery ended there was segregation, discrimination, and racism, all of which still exist today. Many neighborhoods started out as suburbs until a black family moved in, and this ultimately led to devaluing the entire neighborhood. Real estate agents bribed white families to move out and eventually more blacks would move in, thus creating more ghettos. These areas became poverty-stricken landmarks.

The same poverty-stricken areas are expected to have high rates of theft, drug possession, murder, and other crime. Thereby creating the basis for a need to get tough on crime ultimately leading to mass incarceration. Mass incarceration is a social justice issue and the fact that minorities are specifically targeted is a racial issue on a much larger scale. The mass incarceration of black males, was designed to paralyze these men with the shield of the criminal justice system along with the parallels to slavery, was the prime focus of this project, thus falling under the umbrella of the capstone course theme.

Mass incarceration is not understood to be a devious plot with embedded racism on an institutionalized platform. So to give more background to my specific topic Michelle Alexander (Professor, Author of *The New Jim Crow*, civil rights advocate) states:

The genius of the current caste system, and what most distinguishes it from its predecessors, is that it appears voluntary. People choose to commit crimes, and that's why they are locked up or locked out, we are told. This feature makes the politics of responsibility particularly tempting, as it appears the system can be avoided with good

behavior. But herein lies the trap. All people make mistakes. All of us are sinners. All of us are criminals. All of us violate the law at some point in our lives. In fact, if the worst thing you have ever done is speed ten miles over the speed limit on the freeway, you have put yourself and others at more risk of harm than someone smoking marijuana in the privacy of his or her living room. Yet there are people in the United States serving life sentences for first-time drug offenses, something virtually unheard of anywhere else in the world.

Alexander articulates the way in which the prison system creates the illusion that punishment is self-inflicted and deserved. This is the point I am aiming to prove that it is not solely based on a crime or bad behavior but a system that is in place to profit off of these prisoners who no longer have any rights. The prison system perpetuates crime creating a cycle of injustice. I want my audience to see that this is happening by digging deeper rather than simply scratching the surface. Think about whether the crime matches the time as well as the same crime both for black and white counterparts and if they correlate. I want readers to observe both a white male and black male post-release to see what becomes of their lives as they attempt to transition back into society.

My creative process all began with research. By researching mass incarceration amongst black men, I grew passionate about the topic the more I began to read and learn. The information I was learning created inspiration, which prompted me to write and write from the heart. I wrote from the heart in a cunning, meaningful, and critical manner. To sort of help me get in the mindset to write poetry I sat in a comfortable position and started writing down key words. I tend to write swiftly once an idea bursts into my mind almost as if a trigger goes off and these words helped to do that. Statistics were instrumental in the entire process because it added concrete facts to support what I am talking about in each poem. Videos of speeches about the subject matter assisted me in the emotional aspect, so I could really feel as I was writing. Once the right words came to mind along with the emotion behind them, I created poetry. Another aspect that contributed to the formation of my poems was making connections and seeing the different

similarities or patterns. In my piece entitled “3 Strikes” in the last stanza I say “Kids aiming to be like the fathers they’ve never had/Suited up in uniform/Since orange is the new black.” Here I am reiterating the fact that prisoners are modernized slaves also referencing the popular show on Netflix to sort of draw out some familiarity for the audience.

While creating this type of project, I had a keen consciousness of the audience. The audience joins me on my journey through the different aspects surrounding mass incarceration. My relationship to the audience is really close-knit because throughout this journey we are relating and experiencing a lot of the same emotion, confusion, rage, and pain. There is also a certain amount of accountability that society must claim which I incorporated to serve as a method for change. I did not want to come off as preaching but instead bring about the facts of legal discrimination and institutional racism.

The purpose of this creative project is to inform the audience about the brutal truths of the prison system, provoke thought, and see the similarities between prisoners and slaves. There is a lot of stigma surrounding prisons and a strong disconnect between society and prisoners. The general public knows of prison as an idea but the reality of the way prisoners must live every day and what goes on is not visible. The public clings to ideas rather than truths. People like the idea of prisoner transformation with a firm belief in change yet the truth of the matter is society does not allow for it. Ex-convicts are seen solely as criminals instead of human beings, not to mention the many setbacks when trying to return to the general population.

In my collection of poems I use many elements of craft such as rhyme, assonance, alliteration, imagery, etc. These elements makes the words jump off the page and simultaneously forcing the reader to feel emotions. For instance in my poem “3 Strikes,” I say “The 3 strike laws/Set in place with the delusion of decreasing delinquency/Cracking down on blacks with

proficiency/And nonstop infantry/The type of life blacks know from infancy.” I am concise yet detailed with my word choice emphasizing a distraught tone through the use of consonance, assonance and alliteration. It grabs attention while still providing meaning in each and every word.

In the poem “P.I.C.” I open by saying “The prison industrial complex/is complex enough to revive what only faked its death, slavery.” Here I play on the word complex shifting the meaning while making a connection to slavery itself. I do the same thing a little further along in the poem, I say “Black males a target in areas poverty stricken/Plucked away from the ghettos, like their ancestors were snatched from the Mother Land./Like slaves being stripped of their names, raped of pure identity.” The lines are clear, I am directly making the correlation between ghettos in America and Africa. Then the cycles of slavery are present since I am talking about ancestry along with how African-Americans live everyday being a target. These relationships serve as the foundation of what I am going to talk about throughout the rest of the collection which is why I wanted to open with specific images.

For this project I wanted the collection of poems to serve as one piece that flows right into the next. But I also wanted each poem to have the ability to stand on its own without leaning on the others in order for readers to comprehend the messages. This took much vision and flexibility yet the collection is all the more powerful due to the meaning and versatility.

Social action writing is about speaking of topics that have meaning, in that regard I was extremely critical of my methods. I was influenced by William Shakespeare, Assata Shakur, Sandra Cisneros, and Pablo Neruda. William Shakespeare is an influence to many writers and with good reason. He helped me to dive deeper into development and looking into the minds of black men. Shakur was raw with her words yet there was much power in her truthfulness and I

wanted to hold onto that. Cisneros has a certain flare to her works and this bold unapologetic attitude.

While Neruda is known for his popular odes like “Ode to the Lemon,” I was inspired to write an ode to the black man incarcerated. The concept of writing a song of praise to incarcerated black men has not been done before so my work is unique in that way. My poem “Ode to the Black Man Incarcerated” is the poem I am most proud of. It is recognizing the struggle of these men while displaying their resilience and competence. The poem gets people to see beyond the title prisoner to really see that there is a living breathing person underneath. I really wanted to get the message across that humanity and hope are present within these individuals.

One thing I have learned through my project and life is, as Jean-Baptiste Alphonse Karr says “The more things change, the more they remain the same.”

Synthesis Essay

The course's theme is extremely broad and covers feminist theory, race, gender, class, and social justice. I took the theme apart and searched for an issue that I can carry to the next level. My individual project directly links to the theme yet it challenges the status quo in a creative way. Much of the insights gained in the course were extremely beneficial, but it also forced inquiry about solutions. Many times we can acknowledge the problem yet fail to dismantle the true root causes of them. The best way to begin this difficult task is to first get people to think, question, and seek solutions. Instead of accepting what is, we need to learn as much as possible then implement change in a well thought out realistic and effective manner.

For instance in class we were discussing the matter of politics and voting. Students complain about the government and who is in office yet these same students do not exercise their right to vote regularly in local elections. Simply voting for presidential elections are a step towards being politically active and aware however more must be done. One student in class pointed out that in order to change the current system, we must start from the inside out. This discussion got really heated but I think it was beneficial in its entirety because students were passionate and expressive in this specific setting.

When the topic of racial profiling and the duties of a police officer came up. I began to think of both ends of the spectrum, on one end I believe being an officer is precarious yet that should not be an excuse for unlawful acts of violence against citizens. Why are officers constantly killing people? How can this change? One of the solutions I thought about was improving the training of police officers to include psychological testing and how to deal with all sorts of people. Another form of improvement could be having programs for officers with Post

Traumatic Stress Disorder caused by day to day interactions. Thoughts and opinions are both valued and challenged within the classroom and I think that is when real progress can be made.

My project deepened my understanding of the theme in that I found a topic that grabbed my attention. Surprisingly, it was not a topic I thought of at all. I took a step out of my usual comfort zone and decided to talk about mass incarceration. I had the typical view that men locked away in prison deserved to be there, but one day in class we discussed this topic and it had so much depth and complexity. I had to open my mind to gather the idea of my project so I could dissect certain ideologies about the criminal justice system. Mass incarceration is an extremely broad topic, I connected it to the course theme through race and social justice. African-American men are specifically targeted by police and majority of charges are for drug possession, in poverty-stricken areas police are constantly patrolling to make easy arrest and receive more money.

Mass incarceration becomes a social justice issue when men are getting exploited on multiple levels for profits and forced into a nonstop cycle of either remaining behind bars are constantly rotating in and out. Not only does the prison system dehumanize these men but also allows for society to ignore issues like rehabilitation or racism within our society. It is very similar to bacteria just because it cannot be seen with the naked eye does not mean there is no damage being done. In my writing I typically focus on women's issues however, I wanted to shift my perspective to black men incarcerated while also connecting it to modernized racism.

I have demonstrated my ability to work with others through collaborative and interactive discussions. I worked directly with my colleagues to prepare for and facilitate a class session. During the class session we made sure to have a safe environment where each person could contribute in a meaningful way whether through personal experiences or actual fact. There may

not always be agreement; however, constructive criticism is useful on any occasion.

Independently I completed the mandatory assignments/readings as well as putting the necessary time into shaping my project in a way that both aligns my vision with that of the requirements. I was active in documenting my thoughts in a journal format after class discussions were over.

For my creative project I met the necessary criteria and standards for assessment. My project was formed by the shared topic of the course, since initially I had no idea what I wanted to write about. But during a class session one of the enrichment reading materials consisted of a book by Angela Davis and I was completely and utterly fascinated. It was the perfect topic that was new to me and grabbed my interest, challenge my thinking, and fall under the class theme. Within my reflective essay I discuss elements of craft such as alliteration, assonance, consonance, metaphor, and imagery.

These elements shape my poems while evoking emotions out of the intended audience. I mention my creative process and what was needed in order for me to create the poems in the collection. It took a lot of research, inspiration, and vision to put together a piece of work that is versatile yet informative.

I display my own unique voice throughout the entire collection of poems with the aforementioned, one that specifically stands out is a song of praise to the incarcerated black man. This has yet to be done due to the stigma surrounding prisoners, I wanted to show people that men in prison are human. In regards to the intended audience, my work is clearly articulated filling the pages with vivid images, factual evidence, along with relatable connections.

My collection of poems contributes in provoking thought about a topic that is typically seen in the simplest of terms and simultaneously relates to the theme through the channels of social action and race.

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Education: California State University Monterey Bay

Human Communication major with a concentration in creative writing and social action, also Business Administration minor. (4th year student)

GPA: 3.6

Skills & Experience

- **Target Cashier (November 2012-January 2013)**
 - Duties include greeting and engaging customers, ring up purchases, answering questions, along with miscellaneous task as they are needed.
- **Summer Arts Student Host (June 2014-July 2014)**
 - Responsibilities include: Liaison between Course Coordinators and the Assistant Director of Summer Arts also supporting, Course Coordinators and students in organizing materials they may need.
- **Student Assistant position (January 2014-August 2014)**
 - Greeting families and informing them about CSUMB and the surrounding areas, weekly projects, answering phones/completing call downs, attending events, and supporting student recruitment.
- **Old Navy employee (November 2014-December 2015)**
 - Greet, assist, and inform customers of current sales or product inquiries; cashier of purchases, merchandise returns; maintained appearance of store and merchandise with quality presentation and appeal to customers
 - General tasks as needed
- **Marketing Assistant (2014 Chris Botti Benefit Concert)**
 - Assisted with general marketing notifying both local residents and businesses, and surrounding city newspapers (Santa Cruz Sentinel, San Jose Mercury, etc) near Monterey about the benefit concert to help raise funds for youth arts programs.

Honor & Activities

- Dean's list (2012-Present)
- Area council member (Building Representative 2013-2014)
- Leadershape participant (A conference which focuses on becoming a better leader through a series of real life simulations and discussions) (Summer 2014)
- Mentee in the Rotary Mentorship program (2012-Present)
- High Value Volunteer with the CSUMB catalyst center(2015-2016)

Interest

Writing poetry, performing in plays/open mic, engaging with people in casual, business, and formal environments, participate in and/or spectator of volleyball/basketball and outdoor activities.

References

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