



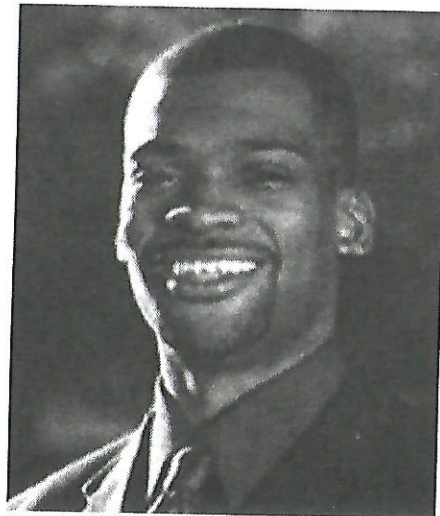
## A Prison Classroom, African American Literature, and the Pedagogy of Freedom

Patrick Elliot Alexander, Duke University

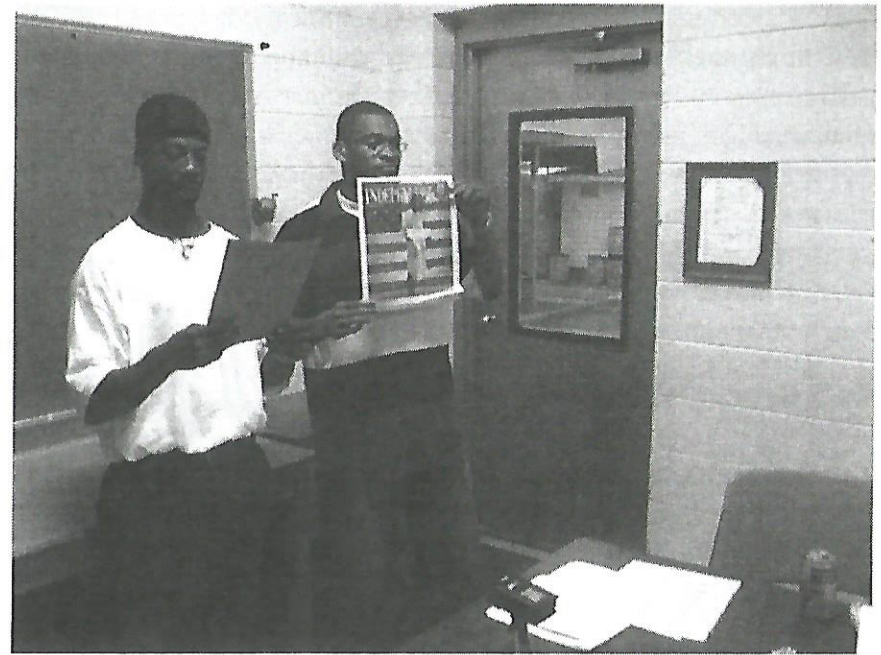
This article examines Alexander's experiences teaching literacy and African American Literature to prison inmates at the Orange County Correctional facility in Hillsborough, North Carolina. For Alexander the conversations and insights provided by these inmates about their experiences and the experiences of the writers they read were indeed emancipatory. As Alexander explains, the process of reading and discussing the works of African American writers can provide a critical lens for understanding one's own subjugation, and participates in a long tradition of African American community literacy by helping to transform the lives and minds of a population disproportionately comprised of people of color.

**“To Live and Remain Outside of the Barb[ed] Wire and Fence”:  
A Prison Classroom, African  
American Literature, and the  
Pedagogy of Freedom<sup>1</sup>**

**W**hat reading has done for me [in this seminar], it has allowed me to live and remain outside the barb[ed] wire and the fence” (Stanley qtd. in Quintana). These are the words of Darnell Stanley, a former



Patrick Alexander



Student and Alexander [left]

participant in Stepping Stones at Orange Correctional Center (OCC) in Hillsborough, North Carolina. Stepping Stones is a community-sponsored college preparatory program that was founded in 2007 by the men of OCC, the Orange County Literacy Council (OCLC), and myself. Stepping Stones emerged as a response to a range of educational needs expressed by OCC's college-minded students—namely, greater poise and proficiency in critical thinking, academic writing, literary critical discussion, and public speaking. Since its founding, the primary function of Stepping Stones has thusly been to offer the men of OCC reading-intensive summer seminars that acquaint or reacquaint them with postsecondary-level coursework. I serve as the primary instructor for these seminars, but I receive assistance from Allison Curseen, my friend and fellow doctoral student in the Department of English at Duke University.



To return to Darnell's observation, though, someone not imprisoned at OCC might reasonably wonder what makes Stepping Stones seminars as liberating as Darnell insists the 2008 seminar had been. A curious outsider might pose the following question: quantitatively-speaking, exactly how have these once-a-week, three-hour academic training sessions helped an imprisoned man "live and remain outside the barb[ed] wire and fence"? (Stanley qtd. in Quintana). Let me establish at the outset of this discussion that as one who has never been incarcerated, I do not pretend to be able to adequately respond to such a query. I teach in an air-conditioned prison classroom for three hours a week during the summer months. Otherwise, I frequent OCC once a week for hour-long visitation ministry nights. I have no idea what does or does not go on at this Hillsborough prison when I'm not there; I know precious little about the goings-on of the facility when I am there.

But what I do sense, having taught African American literature and creative writing at OCC for four summers, is that my students walk away from each class meeting with much more than skill sets for writing an argument paper, strategies for taking a timed essay exam, or guidelines on staging an informed debate. While seminar evaluations and student interviews can never fully inform an outsider of what these seminars accomplish in their lives, what I have sensed from Darnell and other students is that the Stepping Stones classroom is a place within the chain-link fence where they are free to think freely and speak freely, exchange stories and jokes, share visions and decisions, and read up on subjects they are genuinely interested in exploring. Further, because participants in Stepping Stones select the primary literature and issues we discuss in these seminars, and because Allison and I encourage—in fact, insist upon—their honest critique and creative expression at every class meeting, perhaps the classroom at OCC is, for them, a site of momentary freedom amid penal confinement. Perhaps it is a place where in-prison education is truly, to borrow from bell hooks, "the practice of freedom"(13)—a way of learning that speaks to the very personhood of men whose names have been reduced to chains



of state-assigned numbers. Perhaps OCC's Cook School classroom resembles those revolutionary prison classrooms scholar-activist Dylan Rodríguez describes as being "frequently transformed, appropriated, or rearticulated by imprisoned...intellectuals, who may galvanize new communities of solidarity or political kinship among and between course participants"(96), for our classroom is a dialogical space where imprisoned men are free to agree and disagree, develop academic and political literacy, ask endless questions and not always provide answers. As Darnell insists, reading and discussing literature in Stepping Stones seminars has "allowed [him] to live and remain outside the barb[ed] wire and the fence" (Stanley qtd. in Quintana).

In the pages that follow, I will examine the counterhegemonic prison education philosophy and liberatory pedagogical practices that I believe inform learning experiences in Stepping Stones seminars. It is my contention that this philosophy and these practices, while introduced by myself as primary instructor, have been reframed and refashioned by Stepping Stones students in ways that more fully enable their personal empowerment in a space of penal confinement. Further, as a literacy-based initiative that has been funded largely by a local African American church, I also explore how the Stepping Stones program represents an African American contribution to community literacy development.

### **Seeing "The Struggle" in Double: Reading African American Literature in Prison**

These are people who had it hard...from the beginning...us being in prison, we can relate to [these characters] because the struggle is still before us.

—LeJhoyn Holland, a formerly-imprisoned Stepping Stones student

Contrary to what one might infer from the news media, websites, or brochures that advertise the few higher education programs housed in today's correctional facilities, higher education in prison as we now know it did not begin from the outside in but rather from the inside



out. Dylan Rodríguez, author of *Forced Passages: Imprisoned Radical Intellectuals and the U.S. Prison Regime*, and renowned scholar-activist Angela Y. Davis have perhaps most vocally set the record straight on the history of postsecondary prison education in contemporary U.S. culture. Rodríguez, referencing Think Tank, an educational initiative established in the 1970s by male prisoners at Green Haven Prison in Stormville, New York, has made the following observation: “The institution of formal college and high school education programs [in prisons] was a direct response to prison education circles initiated by inmates” (Banks). Green Haven’s Think Tank, was, as Davis has discussed at length in her landmark *Are Prisons Obsolete?*, a group of self-educated male prisoners who committed themselves to schooling each other and younger inmates. Think Tank was also a network for establishing comprehensive educational reform in prison: this group of imprisoned men led the campaign for and organization of a four-year bachelor’s degree program that would later be funded by Pell Grants and run by New York’s Marist College. Further, while Congress had enacted a law that allowed prisoners to apply for Pell Grants in 1965, the Think Tank-initiated program with Marist College would become a model for the many postsecondary education programs instituted in prisons in the ensuing decades (57-59). As one of the Marist program’s earliest free-world supporters has confessed, the founding and formation of Green Haven’s prison school “really came from a desire from the prisoners themselves” (Rubenstein).

Thus, it is not surprising that the Marist program enjoyed several successful decades at Green Haven Prison before Congress’s elimination of public support for prison education in 1994 (Davis 58). Fundamentally a response to educational needs expressed by men who were imprisoned at Green Haven, the program was the brainchild of thinkers, who, though imprisoned, saw themselves as postsecondary students before instructors from Marist College engaged them as such. One of the members of Think Tank, Lateef Islam, speaks to this point in the documentary film *The*



*Last Graduation*, which chronicles the counter-history of postsecondary prison education that I’ve been discussing:

We held classes before the college came. We taught each other, and sometimes under penalty of a beat-up...[there were] certain books [we] couldn’t have, especially those that were Afrocentric: that was a beat-up. [Yet] we had teachers coming in [from Marist College] who were amazed by [our] articulation, by the way we thought, by what we had already developed without a formal education.

Islam’s words are especially revealing, for they indicate how in-prison higher education has historically been tied to a larger prisoners’ rights struggle, a struggle whose terrain is circumscribed by what Rodríguez calls “the political logic of schooling at the site of imprisonment” (94). To clarify: from the perspective of Islam and other men who participated in Think Tank, the need to define among themselves what they learned and how they learned was as important as their opportunity to engage in formalized, in-prison learning. As Rodríguez has brilliantly argued in an analysis of prison schools initiated by philanthropic (and occasionally paternalistic and/or self-aggrandizing) non-imprisoned activists, this idea that prisoners should have a say in the way in which they are educated has often been given lip service, at best (92-104).

Yet in describing pre-Marist College prison education at Green Haven as both a humanizing in-group activity and a punishable offense—as a prisoner-initiated pursuit whose collaborative form and nontraditional content were seen as threats to the prison’s disciplinary social order—Islam suggests that Think Tank was a means by which Green Haven’s inmate population actively practiced a counterhegemonic philosophy of prison education. Islam’s comments demonstrate that Think Tank was a subaltern learning community that addressed imprisoned men’s shared desires for intellectual exploration, cooperative learning, and genuine (inter-)personal empowerment. Especially prior to Marist College’s assistance in postsecondary education at Green Haven Prison, Think



Tank represented for Green Haven inmates a means by which intellectual and political community could be established in a New York state prison system by inmates who had been criminalized for advocating for radical educational reform. As Angela Davis would have us know, many of the imprisoned men who had protested for better educational programs during the 1971 prisoner rebellion at Attica State Prison had been transferred to Green Haven and played a major role in the development of its Think Tank (58).

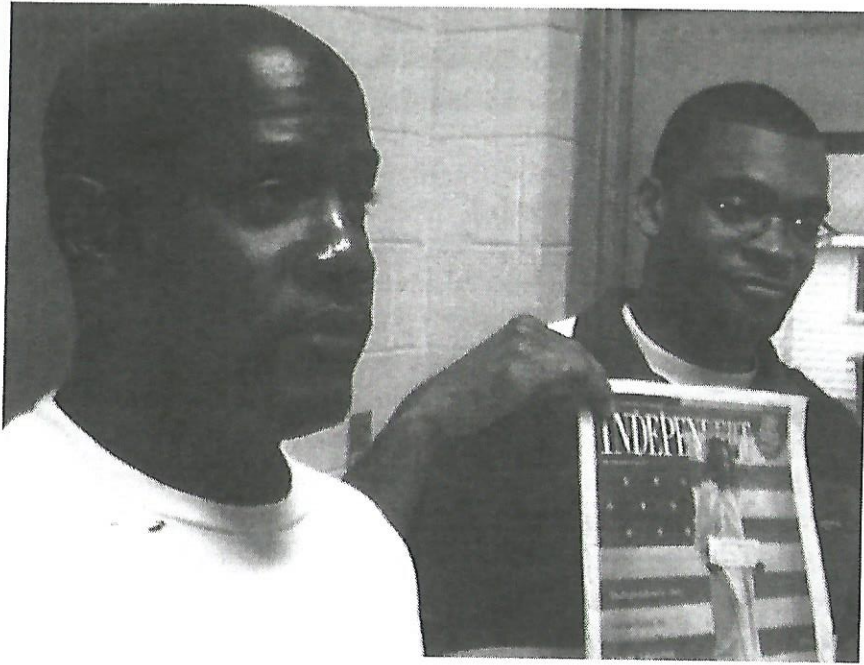
The counterhegemonic prison education philosophy expressed by the very formation of Green Haven Prison's Think Tank speaks directly to the theories that ground curriculum development and learning activities in the Stepping Stones prison classroom that I have been a part of at OCC. First and foremost, Stepping Stones seminars have never been ones that I have crafted on my own. Rather, they have been consistent responses to educational goals and literary curiosities expressed by postsecondary students at OCC; they have been my best attempts to formalize the educational agendas that men imprisoned at OCC have articulated during my prison visits. When I began meeting with men imprisoned at OCC through a weekly visitation ministry in 2006, many of them told me that they had taken college-level courses onsite or by correspondence, but had ultimately underperformed in, dropped out of, or decided against taking the courses because they failed to take into account their most salient academic needs—namely, face-to-face conference time with professors, and regular access to trained writing tutors. The men often used our visitation hour to discuss with me a vision they had for an academic enrichment program that would address the challenges they were experiencing in their college courses. The men would share with me how facility with academic writing and formal presentation factored significantly into the evaluation of their college classes' assignments, exams, and projects, and yet approaches to writing an argument paper, strategies for taking timed essay exams, and techniques for effective public speaking were rarely addressed by their professors. My heart went out to them. With neither a writing center at the facility nor office



hours in which they could meet with their professors, these imprisoned college students simply did not have access to the out-of-class resources, both formal and social, that aid learning inside formal institutions of education.

As our discussions continued, I took notes on this academic skills development program OCC's postsecondary students were envisioning. I would often ask these students to express concretely what their dream college prep program would look like. What specifically would be taught? When would the program be held, and for how long? Would there be prerequisites for admission? How would instructors and students interact in order to ensure that the program was genuinely beneficial to students who were taking or planning to take college classes in a prison setting? With each week, the students became more and more precise in detailing the vision for this program, often citing learning activities that they and other college-minded men at OCC agreed on as being vital to the curriculum (i.e, a question-and-answer formatted workshop on how to take timed essay exams in the infamous blue book *before* actually taking an essay exam).

Finally, we discussed the specific texts and contexts that participants in this program would engage as they sharpened skills in academic writing, critical discussion, and public presentation. As the men began to amass lists of authors and books they wished to engage, I noticed a trend: the vast majority of titles that piqued the men's intellectual curiosities were classic works of African American literature. After one ministry night, I read and re-read the list-in-progress: Richard Wright's novel *Native Son* had received a lot of tallies, followed by Maya Angelou's memoir *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, the autobiographies of Malcolm X and Assata Shakur, the speeches of Martin Luther King, and Ernest Gaines's *A Lesson Before Dying*. The list went on and on. As I sat in my apartment counting tallies, I realized two things: (1) there were many terms' worth of literary texts represented on the list, and (2) the themes of freedom,



*Student and Alexander [left]*

bondage, legal bias, racial injustice, social protest, self-determination, and communal uplift figured prominently in many of the works listed.

A question suddenly crystallized: if a prison classroom that fundamentally speaks to the educational needs of prisoners can inspire new forms of expression, solidarity, and self-actualization, as Rodríguez has argued, then what might reading works of African American literature in an educational environment imagined and articulated by the men of OCC accomplish for them? Perhaps much more than aid in their academic training, I thought. Characters in works of African American literature—but particularly those who appear in the works the men were interested in studying—often launch or advance critiques of institutional power. At one level, the imagined and real-historical persons represented in nineteenth-century slave narratives, early twentieth-century protest



novels, and the neo-slave narratives and jailhouse meditations so prominent in contemporary African American fiction give voice to the lived experiences of black Americans who have struggled for civil and human rights amid institutional constraint—that is, amid slavery, racial segregation, and contestable imprisonment.

But, at another level, African American literary production can itself be understood as a covert political act against institutional power. As Henry Louis Gates has famously argued, “unlike almost every other literary tradition, the Afr[ican] American literary tradition was generated as a response to allegations that its authors did not, could not create ‘literature’” (300). The disproportionately enslaved and unlettered persons who published narratives, poems, and novels in the nineteenth century were popularly imagined as incapable of reading and responding to the signs of Western print culture. Yet by writing texts that were recognized as texts by Western print culture—that is, by protesting against racial injustice in the discourse of the dominant culture—black American slaves and former slaves spoke truth to power, spoke the unspeakable truth of a slave’s literateness and thus humanity to the institution of slavery. African American literary production in the nineteenth century, in other words, forced one of the West’s most defining institutions to redefine its essentialist (and racist) position on the literacy capacities of enslaved men and women.

As I prepared to facilitate literary critical discussions for the first college prep seminar at OCC, I thought much about this history of interrogating institutional power, this revolutionary potential sown into the very fabric of African American literary texts. I began to believe that classroom encounters with African American literature might afford OCC’s college and pre-college students something far greater than formal academic training in critical thinking and close reading. I honestly did not know what to expect, but I knew that by honoring student requests for seminar content, I was participating in a form of Freirean co-intentional education that could perhaps encourage their critical assessments of power at the



site of imprisonment—assessments that might enable them to make their carceral lives more bearable.<sup>2</sup> During the second Stepping Stones seminar I taught at OCC, I had the opportunity to both facilitate and witness one such assessment.

I remember initiating a rather intense critical discussion of Maya Angelou's memoir *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, one in which I asked students to contextualize Angelou's trials and triumphs within a larger history of blacks' struggles for civil rights and human rights. I had insisted that a group of students defend an interesting claim that they had put forward, a claim that Angelou's relentless (and ultimately successful) pursuit of a job amid opposition from a white hiring staff demonstrated that obstacles to self-achievement could be used as stepping stones to self-achievement. The group's members emphasized that in spite of the cool manner in which a railway company receptionist attempted to dismiss a youthful Angelou, she refused to back out on her job request. They stressed that seventeen-year-old Maya was so fixated on getting hired as a streetcar conductor that she asked to see this grown white woman's manager: young Maya, the group pointed out, refused to leave the receptionist's office without challenging the age and race-specific hierarchies expressed in their interaction. Almost immediately thereafter, these students and others began to talk on two levels. On a text analysis-level, they discussed the genuine constraints that Maya confronted due to a 1940s California work culture that was unresolved on how to deal with race in the employment process. On a more personal and immediate level, they discussed how their frequent confrontations with race-specific problems in the prison system put their experiences in direct conversation with young Maya's. Resituating Maya's negotiation tactics with those they had used when making legitimate requests of various prison administrations, they conceptualized the theme of tenacity in Angelou's memoir anew. The students emphasized how, like young Maya, being respectful but resolute in their attempts to negotiate with their superiors often wore them down, often ensured that their requests were ultimately honored (at least in part). Thus, the administrative



obstacles that these imprisoned men of color confronted ultimately became stepping stones toward achieving many of their personal goals in prison (Hedin 280-285).

It was after this discussion of Angelou's memoir that an observation from LeJhoyn Holland, a participant in the first Stepping Stones seminar, began to take on new meaning for me. In a story Duke News had done on the seminar, LeJhoyn, referencing the struggles of characters in novels by Richard Wright and Ernest Gaines, commented: "These are people who had it hard...from the beginning...us being in prison, we can relate to [these characters] because the struggle is still before us" (Holland qtd in Todd 24). Finally, after the discussion of Angelou's memoir, I was getting the sense that as LeJhoyn and other Stepping Stones students were engaging works of African American literature, they were seeing "the struggle" in double, drawing parallels between fictional captives' struggles for justice and their own struggles for fairness as captives of the state. From what I could gather, more than a few members of the Stepping Stones seminars were imagining ways in which they, like the protagonists they read about, could demonstrate the reality of their agency amid severe institutional constraint. Thus, the freedom of choice that OCC's postsecondary students have experienced by self-selecting African American literary texts for Stepping Stones seminars, and the interpretations they have shared in critical discussions of these texts suggest that the Stepping Stones prison classroom has been a place where imprisoned men have begun to rethink their local experiences as part of the broader historical struggle that marginalized cultures have involved themselves in in order to gain access to the larger American community.

### **Pedagogue versus Prisoner: The Prison Classroom & the Pedagogy of Freedom**

I can still...teach people.

—Foma Fowler, imprisoned, *Stepping Stones* participant



As I return to Darnell's statement—"what reading has done for me [in this seminar], it has allowed me to live and remain outside the barb[ed] wire and the fence"—I am reminded of his insistence on taking a leadership role in the instruction of our literary critical discussions in the 2008 Stepping Stones seminar. On the one hand, I have committed myself to what bell hooks has described as "engaged pedagogy" since Stepping Stones seminars began in 2007.<sup>3</sup> I've both encouraged student expression and students' questions of my own expressions during my four years of teaching African American literature at OCC. Furthermore, I have tried to take seriously my students' desire for community by creating an environment that is dialogue-driven, instead of lecture-based. For instance, for the last fifteen minutes of each creative writing hour, I open the floor to students, urging them to "come to the stage" and share with the group poems, stories, and reflections, they've been writing throughout the term. These open mic-like conclusions to Stepping Stones meetings afford my students an opportunity to both speak their minds and receive constructive feedback from the group. Further, I have often made a point of encouraging two students to lead off the critical discussion hour by providing their original close reading of a passage in a novel, or sharing their written reflections on a controversial issue raised in a memoir. I have also often paused in my own theorizations on a literary text and posed the question: "Even if you are in agreement with the working thesis I've just presented, what are some problems with it?" Sometimes hearing an idea that I had spent weeks pondering get dissected and adeptly dismissed by my students has made my skin crawl, but I have always believed that by encouraging Stepping Stones participants to call into question my thinking and/or the framework that informed it, I have done more than help them develop close reading skills. I have also been moving closer and closer toward participating with them in a genuinely liberatory pedagogical practice. LeJhoyn quickly caught on to the "engaged pedagogy" I was striving to establish in our classroom: "[Patrick] wasn't just lecturing...he would explain things and then give us a shot at it—that's what made the class so interesting" (Holland qtd in Todd 24).



Despite genuine attempts to create the kind of dialogical learning community that would resist the famous Freirean "'banking' concept of education," our Stepping Stones classroom could not be a site of genuine liberatory pedagogical practice until I moved out of my role as The Authority (Freire 71-86). In other words, because I was teaching in a correctional setting, in an environment defined by a set of power dynamics that positioned prisoners as conversationally subordinate to non-prisoners, I would have to be sensitive to how my position as The Exclusive Pedagogue might undermine the very liberatory pedagogical practices I was invested in opening our classroom up to. As such, Darnell's request to teach an entire critical discussion session represented the most defining moment I have witnessed in the development of liberatory pedagogy at OCC. Weeks before students were expected to read Nathan McCall's bestselling autobiography *Makes Me Wanna Holler*, Darnell had made up in his mind that he would be our pedagogical guide on the Monday night we planned to discuss it. Thrilled by Darnell's initiative, I readily agreed to have him lead our group through the work. And then, the evening that Darnell taught *Holler*, our learning community radically transformed. As he posed provocative questions, sauntered about the classroom, clarifying and critiquing his original thesis, as he staged an incredibly interactive group discussion of McCall's autobiography, Darnell won our undivided attention. Teaching appeared to be second nature to him. Needless to say, the end of the meeting arrived too soon.

As I walked out of OCC's entry gate that night, I realized that Darnell had effectively demonstrated to me and his classmates that he was neither a prisoner nor a pupil. In our Stepping Stones classroom, in the learning community that imprisoned men at OCC and I had collectively established as a space for open and engaged critical dialogue, Darnell had reintroduced himself as pedagogue. Darnell had reframed and refashioned the liberatory pedagogical practices that I had initiated in the seminar in a way that enabled both his professional development and personal empowerment at a site of imprisonment. As a result, Darnell's



classmates and I spent the rest of the term engaging him in new ways, and Darnell spent the rest of the term engaging us in ways previously unimagined. In the liberatory space of the Stepping Stones learning classroom, Darnell was now neither a prisoner nor a pupil. He was a pedagogue.

Darnell's example suggests that liberatory pedagogical practice in the prison classroom—if genuine—requires a learning community to contest those asymmetries of power that position prisoners as intellectually subordinate to non-prisoners. It requires, in other words, non-imprisoned instructors like myself to be willing to play the role of student sometimes.<sup>4</sup> Along these lines, I can't help but believe that our learning community's commitment to make room for Darnell, *The Pedagogue*, also factored into what he has articulated as genuine liberation in our prison classroom: "What reading has done for me [in this seminar], it has allowed me to live and remain outside the barb[ed] wire and the fence."

### Conclusion

The Stepping Stones program that I have been blessed to participate in should also be understood as part of a larger, community-sponsored, literacy-based initiative. First, the formal academic skills training that college and pre-college students at OCC receive through Stepping Stones is provided by the unpaid intellectual expertise of Duke University's professors and graduate students. It is, in other words, exceptional and consistent voluntary instruction that has also helped to make Stepping Stones the critically-engaged learning community that it is. Maurice Wallace, my dissertation advisor and professor of English and African and African American Studies at Duke, has dedicated much time and critical thought to Stepping Stones seminars since 2007. Professor Wallace has taught and attended sessions, and has even sent in pedagogical videography when he's been unavailable. His sincerity and intellectual



brilliance are frequently acknowledged by Stepping Stones participants. Allison Curseen, a fellow doctoral student in Duke's English department who also holds an MFA in Creative Writing, has thrown herself into teaching creative writing through innovative methods in our 2009 and 2010 Stepping Stones seminars. Several other Duke graduate students have attended and/or facilitated discussions at Stepping Stones meetings, providing invaluable insights on the literary texts that we have studied.

Beyond Duke, a few others have consistently volunteered their intellectual energies to these seminars. Solomon Burnette, a graduate of North Carolina Central University, offered useful perspective on Malcolm X's political-intellectual evolution during our 2009 seminar, which featured the writings Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, and Barack Obama. Hillsborough residents Gabe and Mary DesHarnais, who have held a reading and discussion group at OCC for years, frequently contribute historical perspectives on texts we read in Stepping Stones seminars. The critical knowledge base that Stepping Stones students have worked with has thusly been a communal offering toward their academic skills training—or rather (in light of my previous discussions), critical literacy development.

The funding and vocal acknowledgement of Stepping Stones seminars by the greater Durham community has also functioned to bring the oft-neglected prison classroom into discussions of community literacy development. First, the Orange County Literacy Council (OCLC) has sponsored these seminars since they began in 2007. The OCLC has funded the books, notebooks, pens, folders, and snacks that keep Stepping Stones students engaged during our ten-week terms. OCLC representatives have also advised me in the curriculum development phases of many Stepping Stones seminars, and have repeatedly talked up the Stepping Stones program in Durham and in neighboring North Carolina communities.<sup>5</sup> Additionally, Durham's Union Baptist Church, an African American church that has served as my worship home during graduate school, has regularly donated books and made tremendous





financial contributions to the Stepping Stones seminars since 2008. Put simply, without my church community's consistent, year-round monetary gifts, there is no way that these seminars would have continued on the numerous occasions when student numbers unexpectedly skyrocketed, and supplies ran short in the middle of a semester. The senior pastor and associate pastor at Union Baptist have also provided consistent vocal support of Stepping Stones seminars. Despite overfull schedules, they have made it their business to attend Stepping Stones sessions and make mention of the Stepping Stones program during Union Baptist's worship services. They and the many members of Union's congregation have given of their time, financial resources, and cooking talents in order to show Stepping Stones students that they are genuinely admired and supported in their literacy pursuits by an African American community just twenty minutes down the road from them. Thus, the Stepping Stones program represents a significant African American contribution to community literacy development.

The vision of OCC's college and pre-college students is clearly a communally-shared vision, a commitment to critical literacy development that represents the collaboration of imprisoned and non-imprisoned advocates of prisoners' academic skills training. Put differently, that Darnell and other Stepping Stones students have voiced their own educational development and freedom in our seminars testifies to the greater Durham community's ability to understand imprisoned men at OCC as part of their community. As Angela Davis has illuminated quite masterfully in the culminating pages of *Are Prisons Obsolete?*, the choice of non-imprisoned communities to establish "genuine solidarity" with imprisoned populations is what ultimately promises radical transformation on both sides of the razor-wire fence (103-113) Because the greater Durham community has joined me in reconceptualizing the academic skills training of OCC prisoners as the critical literacy development of committed learners who happen to be in prison, Darnell and so many others continue to "live and remain outside the barb[ed] wire and the fence."



## Endnotes

- 1 I wish to express my gratitude to Professor Maurice Wallace for serving as my dissertation chair at Duke University and for being my prison education advocate even when Stepping Stones was in an-embryonic stage of development. Prof Wallace, this essay is a reflection of the many dialogues we have shared as a result of your pedagogical participation in Stepping Stones seminars at Orange Correctional Center. I also thank Professor Dylan Rodríguez, who heard and responded to an earlier version of this essay during two sessions at the States of Captivity conference at Duke University in 2009. Prof Rodríguez, your impressive scholarship on imprisoned intellectuals, and the additional time you took to engage me in conversation after the States of Captivity conference mean more to me than words can convey. This essay is also indebted to a few others: first, thanks to the men of Orange Correctional Center, especially those who have either participated in Stepping Stones seminars or helped to organize them; second, I wish to thank Professor Wahneema Lubiano, whose teaching on pedagogy and the prison space in her graduate course, "Teaching Race, Teaching Gender," informs much of my thinking in this essay; lastly, I am grateful to doctoral students Wallis Baxter and Reginald Patterson, who helped me through the writing of an earlier version of this essay for our "Education and Liberation" panel at the 2009 College Language Association convention.
- 2 Freire writes: The starting point for organizing the program content of education or political action must be the present, existential, concrete situation reflecting the aspirations of the [oppressed] people [...]. We must never...provide the [oppressed] people with programs that have little or nothing to do with their own preoccupations, doubts, hopes, and fears—programs which at times increase the fears of the oppressed consciousness. It is not our role



to speak to the [oppressed] people about our own view of the world, nor to attempt to impose that view on them, but rather to dialogue with the people about their view and ours. We must realize that their view of the world, manifested variously in their action, reflects their *situation* in the world. Educational and political action which is not critically aware of this situation runs the risk either of 'banking' or of preaching in the desert. For more see *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 93-96.

- 3 hooks writes: Engaged pedagogy necessarily values student expression [but]...students are not the only ones who are asked to share, to confess. Engaged pedagogy does not seek simply to empower students. Any classroom that employs a holistic model of learning will also be a place where teachers grow, and are empowered by the process. That empowerment cannot happen if we refuse to be vulnerable while encouraging students to take risks. Professors who expect students to share confessional narratives but who are themselves unwilling to share are exercising power in a manner that could be coercive. For more see *Teaching to Transgress*, 20-21.
- 4 Also worth noting is Angela Y. Davis's popular 1997 lecture, "The Prison Industrial Complex," in which she describes a similar scenario taking place in a class she taught at San Francisco County Jail. In this class, Davis discusses the real benefits of positioning incarcerated women who were part of this class as instructors during the beginning weeks of the term, especially since the (non-imprisoned) undergraduate students from San Francisco State University who were part of the class had assumed that they (or Davis) would always be teaching the incarcerated women.
- 5 Stepping Stones is featured in the Summer 2010 edition of the Orange County Literacy Council (OCLC) newsletter. Also, in December 2007, former OCLC program coordinator Kathy



Alberter informed participants in the Raleigh/Durham/Chapel Hill Community Literacy for the Incarcerated Workshop about Stepping Stones.

### Works Cited

- Alexander, Patrick and Allison Curseen. Interview with Madeline Parker. "Stepping Stones: A Transitional Program for Post-GED Students." *READ*. <http://www.orangeliteracy.org/home/documents/fy11-READ-summeredition-final-8.31.10.pdf>, 2-3. Web. 24 September 2010.
- Banks, Gabriel. "Learning Under Lockdown." *Colorlines* (Spring 2003). [http://colorlines.com/archives/2003/03/learning\\_under\\_lockdown.html](http://colorlines.com/archives/2003/03/learning_under_lockdown.html). Web. 24 September 2010.
- Davis, Angela Y. *Are Prisons Obsolete?*. New York: Seven Stories Press, 2003. Print.
- Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: Continuum, 1970. Print.
- Gates, Henry Louis. "'What's Love Got to Do with It?' Critical Theory, Integrity, and the Black Idiom." *African American Literary Theory: A Reader*. Ed. Winston Napier, New York: New York University Press, 2000. Print.
- Hedin, Raymond. "Teaching Literature in Prisons." *College English*. 41.3 (1979): 280-285. Print.
- hooks, bell. *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*. New York: Routledge, 1994. Print.
- Mendez, J. Edward. "From Corrections to College: Initiative Paves Way to Higher Ed." *City Limits Weekly*. No. 540. 19 June 2006.



[http://www.collegeinitiative.org/ci/about/ci\\_news](http://www.collegeinitiative.org/ci/about/ci_news). Web. 24 September 2010.

Quintana, Sergio. "Duke Grad Student Teaches Orange County Inmates." <http://orange.mync.com/site/orange/news/print/7315.html>. Web. 24 September 2010.

Rodriguez, Dylan. *Forced Passages: Imprisoned Radical Intellectuals and the U.S. Prison Regime*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006. Print.

*The Last Graduation: The Rise and Fall of College Programs in Prison*. Produced by Zahm Productions and Deep Dish TV, 2005. Film.

Todd, James. "Student's Prison Course Yields Literary Insights." <http://www.dukenews.duke.edu/2007/10/patrick.html>. Web. 24 September 2010.



## African American Community Literacy and Urban Debate

Susan Cridland-Hughes, Bard College

This article examines an African American urban debate league in order to understand the types of literacy training youth in these leagues undergo. As the author notes, debate leagues are important sites of community literacy that are often overshadowed by the popular views of these leagues as highly competitive, predominantly white, and for the socially affluent. However, Cridland-Hughes shows that facilitators and organizers in urban debate settings often shape these leagues as sites of communal and cultural education and support. Her discussion of City Debate, one such organization enacting community literacy, illustrates the relationships built through these sites of rhetorical training and their connection to the development of black youth as critical thinkers, speakers, and citizens of tomorrow.

### African American Community Literacy and Urban Debate

"Most people see [debate] as an extracurricular activity, most people see it as a fun little mind game. But for the inner city youth... it's more of a lifeline."

—Jay, 3/20/2009

"I guess I'm not fearful of a world in which you have a whole bunch of young people that are activists. It just means...we have people caring about the world they live in."

—Jamal, 2/27/2008