Over the past 40 years, the prison population in the United States has grown from 250,000 to nearly 2.5 million. This means that more than 1 in 100 American adults is currently incarcerated in jails or prisons (“Collateral Costs”). US incarceration numbers are even more jarring when understood within a global context. Despite comprising only 5% of the global population, the United States now accounts for 24% of the world’s prison population. As a nation, the United States incarcerates more citizens than China, Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, North Korea, Venezuela, and Cuba all put together, more than “First World” nations such as England, France, and Canada combined (Hartney).

Incarceration numbers are even more alarming for minority populations. One in 15 black males and 1 in 26 Hispanic males is currently incarcerated; 1 in 3 African American males and 1 in 5 Hispanic males between 20 and 29 years old is on parole, probation, or incarcerated (“Collateral Costs”). Women are the fastest-growing segment of the prison population, increasing at twice the rate of men over the past 25 years (“Imprisonment and Families”). Moreover, there are currently eight times as many women incarcerated as there were in 1985.

The stakes of mass imprisonment are not exhausted at the level of incarceration. As Michelle Alexander demonstrates in The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness, felony convictions result in a de facto permanent second-class citizenship that often results in a denial of access to employment, housing, education, and voting rights. While Alexander focuses on the racial dimensions of mass incarceration, her study also speaks to a broader problem of an expanding criminal justice system that prioritizes punishment over rehabilitation and restoration.

For many people, it is easier to imagine the end of the world itself than to imagine a world without prisons. This reality is not only linked to the astronomical number of human beings currently housed under criminal supervision, but to a broader set of social, political, economic, cultural, and ideological commitments that have normalized mass incarceration (Abu-Jamal and Hill; Davis). From our increasing societal focus on surveillance (Foucault) to the use of legally punitive measures in response to drug addiction, poverty, and homelessness (Wacquant), we have entered a moment in which imprisonment has become our default response to social problems.

Given these historically unprecedented realities, the current moment can be aptly called “the age of incarceration.”
The War on Our Students

The age of incarceration has had a particularly damaging impact on our students. Anti–baggy pants legislation, civil injunctions against gangs, and imposition of juvenile curfews represent a few of the ways that we have created a political and cultural environment that re-frames youth as social burdens rather than sites of investment, love, protection, or hope (Giroux, *Youth*; Hill). At the same time, after-school programs, public libraries, recreation centers, and other spaces empirically proven to reduce crime and promote achievement have been eliminated or severely reduced due to state and federal budget cuts (Giroux, *Education*).

Within the formal schooling context, the age of incarceration has produced a radical shift in the culture and practice of education. Over the past two decades there has been a sharp rise in youth incarceration, zero-tolerance policies, and the militarization of public schools (Saltman and Gabbard). From the rise of metal detectors in schools to the expansion of surveillance equipment, the physical and cultural character of school is increasingly reminiscent of the prison (Kupchik; Monahan and Torres).

As Decoreau J. Irby points out, this has resulted in both the “widening” and “deepening” of the school “discipline net.” This means that school discipline handbooks have widened the range of actions that can place students in disciplinary trouble. For example, simply bringing a pair of scissors to school is now considered a disciplinary infraction in many schools. In addition, school discipline that was once primarily administered by school officials is increasingly handled by courts and law enforcement, thus allowing students to get into deeper levels of trouble (Irby). These conditions only further fortify the pipeline from schools to prisons. Moreover, they speak to the ways that our students are directly and indirectly affected by our collective shift toward punitive public policies.

Why Should English Teachers Care?

Like all educational fields, English education is being profoundly affected by the age of incarceration. Each day, our schools are increasingly modeled after the logic and imperatives of mass incarceration. Every year, our English classrooms are increasingly filled with students whose parents, siblings, and loved ones are tethered to the prison system. Also, given the sharp rise of incarceration, prisons, jails, and youth detention centers are becoming primary sites for English education with growing regularity. If we take as a given that English education should be responsive to the lived realities and cultural orientations of our students, then we must accept the development of an English education in the age of incarceration as an indispensable part of our professional development.

This means that English educators must not only be aware of the current cultural and political moment but also develop concrete responses to it. We must develop curriculum and pedagogy that responds to the age of incarceration in specific, productive, and transformative fashion. Through the books we assign, the themes we highlight, questions we raise, and the environment in which we operate, English teachers have the ability to create space for rich discussion, vigorous critique, and principled action.

This Issue

This special issue explores the ways that the English classroom can be used to highlight, understand, critique, and support or challenge the age of incarceration.

This issue explores the ways that the English classroom can be used to address students dealing with imprisonment: How can English be used...
Teaching English in the Age of Incarceration

to connect to students whose friends, family, and neighbors are increasingly under criminal supervision? What types of English education are taking place within prison-based settings, including youth detention centers, jails, and halfway houses? How is the prison system supporting and/or undermining English education?

This issue also addresses how issues of confinement (broadly conceived) are addressed within the English canon: How are teachers making use of fiction and nonfiction texts written by authors held against their will in prisons, plantations, concentration camps, and other confined settings? What connections are English teachers making between confinement authors—from Miguel de Cervantes to Malcolm X—and the currently incarcerated?

This issue also locates sites of possibility for social change: How can English language arts be used to spotlight, examine, or challenge the current incarceration crisis?

To be sure, it will take considerable intellectual, political, and pedagogical work to fully understand and properly address the age of incarceration. This special issue serves as an important first step toward that goal.

Works Cited


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Marc Lamont Hill is associate professor of English education at Teachers College, Columbia University. He is the author of Beats, Rhymes, and Classroom Life: Hip-Hop Pedagogy and the Politics of Identity and co-author of The Classroom and the Cell: Conversations on Black Life in America. He is the recipient of the 2010 David H. Russell Award for Distinguished Research in the Teaching of English. An anti-prison activist for years, he has worked with the ACLU Drug Reform Project, the Pennsylvania Prison Society, and numerous grassroots projects. He may be reached at mh2989@tc.columbia.edu.