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## Temporary Visitor: Reevaluating my Undergraduate Service-Learning Experience Tutoring at a California Juvenile Probation Camp

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## Temporary Visitor: Reevaluating my Undergraduate Service-Learning Experience Tutoring at a California Juvenile Probation Camp

### Cover Page Footnote

An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Pacific Sociological Association conference in San Diego 2012. The author would like to thank Robert M. Emerson and three anonymous reviewers for helpful comments on an earlier draft. The piece also benefited from suggestions made by Kerry Ferris and Victor Rios. The American Council of Learned Societies supported the research and writing of this essay.

I've been peeking through keyholes for as long as I can remember. During my senior year at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), I had the opportunity to open the door and step into the world's largest juvenile justice system. A sociology course required that I participate in a tutoring program at Camp Vernon Kilpatrick, a probation facility for offenders too young to be tried as adults. At Kilpatrick, I was readily assigned to Keith, a 15-year old African American, and Anthony, a 17 year-old Latino. Nearly a decade later, back in California teaching sociology at a small liberal arts college, I found myself wondering about Keith and Anthony. Curious, I searched through a box of old college folders and spiral notebooks looking for my field notes where yellowed pages filled with thick description brought back memories of my experiences at Kilpatrick. With a new set of eyes I looked beyond the journal's detail and began to place my experiences in a larger social context. The narrow, positivistic focus of an undergraduate novice had been replaced by a more sophisticated postmodern sensitivity demanding, "location be construed not as a relatively bounded and separate whole, but as a place where various flows intersect" (Trouillot 2009).<sup>1</sup> This essay argues that while service-learning supposedly benefits both parties, college students have the most to gain. Placing Keith and Anthony's detention in the broader context of mass incarceration, I began to think critically about my service-learning experience.

At UCLA I looked forward to the ethnographic immersion course with Robert Emerson, whose co-authored book with Rachel Fretz and Linda Shaw, *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes* served as the class's academic bible (Emerson 1995). Fretz taught writing while Emerson and Kerry Ferris guided us through abstract sociological theories; Natasha Chen helped us discern meaning from our notebook jottings. The entire team provided emotional support. We grew close and many of us stayed in touch after we graduated (Astin et al, 2000). In-class discussions helped connect our service experiences with academic course material, and reflection successfully transformed experience into learning (Hutchings and Wutzdorff 1988:15). Tutoring at Kilpatrick increased both my awareness of social inequalities and my sense of personal efficacy. The hyphen in service-learning was critical because it symbolized what should be a reciprocal relationship (Jacoby 1996): Participants were perceived as partners not clients. My teachers cautioned not to view Kilpatrick as a laboratory but rather as a place where Keith, Anthony, and I could learn from one another (Evans 2009).

Traveling northbound on Highway 101 out of Los Angeles and heading toward Malibu Canyon's steep cliffs and red rock formations, California oaks and wildflowers line the road. In the back of a white van marked "LA County

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<sup>1</sup> Also see *Ethnography through Thick and Thin* by George Marcus that claims a strategically situated single-site ethnography can be achieved by following: the people, the thing, the metaphor, the plot or story, the life or biography, the conflict. George Marcus, 1998:89-99.

Probation Department” Keith and Anthony were probably seeing this panorama for the first time, a vast contrast from the inland desert areas where they grew-up. More than likely this was the first time they had left their neighborhoods. Two deputy probation officers accompanied them, one drove while the other kept his eyes on the nine transports. Eventually they left the highway, turning on to Kanan Road and into Malibu Canyon where they reached two camps. Situated side-by-side Kilpatrick is a secured facility and Miller is an open institution, one of the last in existence. At any given time both camps are filled to capacity with approximately 115 boys each. Kilpatrick has three dormitories and 25 solitary confinement rooms. In my seminar paper at UCLA I would explore themes connected to the prison as a total institution, one that severs residents from society and systematically strips them of their individuality while creating a new, disciplined self (Goffman 1961). To begin this process of reforming identities, the state issued the boys uniforms and shaved their heads.

As an undergraduate I equated ethnography with participant-observation, believing that one must be immersed within a culture to generate knowledge based on that community’s context. There are, however, different degrees of participation, all allowing for various types of observation. A less conventional understanding views ethnography as a sensibility that goes beyond face-to-face contact and can include examining a community’s representations in cultural texts. With a finite set of field notes as my only means of recalling past experiences, I looked for other ways to fill the gaps in my knowledge and satisfy my curiosity. For instance, those notes described the waiting room outside the main campground, where photographs of Kilpatrick sports teams and individual athletes covered a wall. Former detainees turned professional athletes Keyshawn Johnson and Michael Black stood out among the others. Yet I didn’t know the story behind Kilpatrick’s athletic program. Nine years after I conducted my fieldwork, the film *Gridiron Gang* was released, documenting the role of sports in inmate rehabilitation.

The film tells the true story of Sean Porter, a probation officer who developed the high school football program at Kilpatrick in 1990. The beginning of the movie shows Porter feeling defeated, having just learned of the death of a former detainee in a drive-by shooting. Boys leave Kilpatrick without internalizing acceptable values and norms; as Porter remarks sarcastically, “Teamwork is four kids robbing a liquor store.” To teach them the tools they will need to succeed outside the camp, he implements a football program. Structured activities reduce recidivism rates by teaching youth responsibility and a strong work ethic, values purportedly lacking in their home life. The Mustangs lose their first game 38-0 but in true Hollywood style bounce back and are winning by the movie’s end. When the credits roll the audience discovers the fate of the original team members: “all of the kids have been released. 24 are going to school. Three are working full-time jobs. And only five are back in jail” (Joanou 2006). Because of Kilpatrick’s pride in these statistics, the program has greatly expanded

by the time I arrive in 1997. Fittingly, Keith played basketball and Anthony was on the baseball team.

Before *Gridiron Gang*, other movies examined gang life in Los Angeles; among the more popular were *Colors* (Hopper 1988), *Boyz n the Hood* (Singleton 1991), and *Menace II Society* (Hughes 1993). Similarly, Camp Kilpatrick has been the subject of several books. Leon Bing's 1991 *Do or Die* features Kilpatrick along with an account of gang life in Los Angeles. The book was an immediate success, intriguing Americans with its exposure of a relatively new subculture (Bing 1991). Bing introduced publishers to Monster Kody Scott whom she met at Kilpatrick and he, too, wrote a bestseller. Published in 1993, Scott handwrote *Monster: The Autobiography of an L.A. Gang Member* from his prison cell (Scott 1993). Kilpatrick appears to a lesser extent in Pulitzer-prize winner Edward Humes' 1996 *No Matter How Loud I Shout: A Year in the Life of Juvenile Court*, a comprehensive and moving story about the world's largest juvenile justice system (Humes 1996).

Like most incarcerated youth Keith and Anthony were failing school. With eighty-eight cities and about the same number of school districts strewn across urban, suburban, and rural landscapes, it's easy to slip through the cracks in Los Angeles. Public high schools are labeled as "dropout factories" where no more than 60% of freshmen make it to their senior year. In 1997 only 56% of black males and 52% of Latino males, often limited by English proficiency, graduated in Los Angeles County. The overall rate was higher at 68% when mediated by white males and females from across all racial and ethnic categories.<sup>2</sup> The increasingly punitive approach to public education, borrowed from the criminal justice system, partly explains high dropout rates. Within this approach, students are suspended and expelled for minor infractions as certain acts like drug and alcohol use more frequently result in referrals to law enforcement rather than being dealt with internally (Hirschfield 2008). Collectively these policies, referred to as the "school-to-prison pipeline," push students out of educational institutions and eventually into the juvenile justice system (Wald and Losen 2003). More than a trajectory, both educational and state systems collude to criminalize and punish inner city boys according to Victor Rios (2011). Like Keith and Anthony, boys subjected to the most intense forms of social control tend to be poor and members of racial and ethnic minorities (Noguera 2003). The monitoring of school performance is reactive and inconsistent. Minor problems have typically escalated by the time overworked Deputy Probation Officers (DPO) get involved. However, with caseloads at a ratio of 1:150 DPOs have limited contact with probationers (Humes 1996).

Kilpatrick stands out among the 18 other juvenile facilities not only because of its sports teams, but also because of the tutoring program that would

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<sup>2</sup> Public High School Graduation Rates, California Postsecondary Education Commission; Tables available at <http://www.cpec.ca.gov/StudentData/HSGradReport.asp?Area=RegionM>

bring the three of us together. Local universities and colleges provide human capital as students from UCLA, Pepperdine, and Pierce College arrive daily to help Kilpatrick detainees with reading and writing. As a tutor it was my job to set an example for Anthony and Keith by expanding their frame of reference, encouraging them to finish high school, and empowering them to go to college. A scheduled fieldtrip to the UCLA campus familiarized the boys with the university environment. Tucked away with my field notes a snapshot from that day reminds me of it.

These arrangements enhance the relations between the institution and the wider community. For me the experience was life-changing and entirely unforgettable. I received college credit, of course. An impressive addition to my resume, it helped me find a job later as a substitute teacher for the Los Angeles Unified School District where I witnessed firsthand the kind of education Keith and Anthony had been receiving—no permanently assigned teachers but rather only substitutes like myself rotating in and out. Kilpatrick gave me a glimpse into a world that I hadn't known existed. I took advantage of my educational opportunities using college to explore things I knew nothing about. My favorite classes incorporated community service, building on the “notion that learning must be rooted in the student's own experience—that knowing and doing are connected” (Hativa 2001:126). The ethnography class, by incorporating service-learning, seemed to make school relevant by connecting academics to the real world. Because of my experiences with this vital connection, I developed a commitment to teaching and activism, and, as part of an ongoing personal development process, I learned about social responsibility. For me college provided a window of opportunity to engage with people from different backgrounds, complex social issues, and dueling concepts of oppression and privilege. My experiences with Keith and Anthony at Kilpatrick also likely inspired my post graduation career choices and voluntary activities (Fisher 1996).

There's no question that I approached my work with a big heart and good intentions. As I read my field notes I'm struck by both my confidence and naivety; I thought I could change these boys' lives. I bought them books, school supplies, and at their insistence lots of soda and candy. At Borders Bookstore in West Hollywood I found the newly published *Just Give me the Damn Ball: The Fast Times and Hard Knocks of an NFL Rookie* (Johnson 1997). It was simply written and accessible, and I hoped they would enjoy the sports theme or at least find inspiration in the author, Keyshawn Johnson, who himself served time at Kilpatrick. After Johnson was released he attended the University of Southern California and in 1996 became the first pick in the National Football League draft. He played for the New York Jets and several other teams before retiring and becoming a broadcaster on ESPN. I expected Keith and Anthony to follow that same path. I did not understand that Johnson was the exception *not* the rule. In addition to reading I integrated simple writing assignments. For example, I had the boys write a hypothetical dedication page for the book that I hoped they would

pen one day. Keith thanked his mother and me, writing, “To you Mary for happen me and not thinking that I’m a bad kid I thank you that.” Keith was a more advanced reader than Anthony, and after a few sessions it became clear that Johnson’s book was too easy, so I opened my UCLA course reader and asked him to read out-loud an article written by Robert Emerson. He may not have fully comprehended the material, but he read and pronounced the words perfectly. Wanting to encourage him I made a big deal about the fact that he could read at the college level. Furthermore, I took it as a sign that I was making a difference. Soon after, I gave him a copy of *Native Son* thinking the novel’s themes of racial prejudice and discrimination would resonate.

Keith and Anthony were 2 of 66,406 youth arrested in Los Angeles County in 1997.<sup>3</sup> There are 67 juvenile detention camps in California; Los Angeles operates 19, more than any other county. At age 15 Keith’s probation file was already an inch thick. He was named after his father but lived with his dad’s replacement, an unemployed stepfather who worked as a security guard when he could find work. His mother collected \$564.00 a month from welfare to support the family of five. On November 4, 1996 Keith was arrested for burglary and possession of stolen goods. Along with friends he had pried open a neighbor’s back door. After police found a missing cell phone and gold chain at Keith’s house he was placed on a “grant of home on probation.” A year later he was arrested again, this time for carrying a concealed weapon. Keith told the police that he carried the gun for protection, and his mother backed his story, telling officers that he had been jumped before. The probation department recommended that custody be taken from the parents and that Keith be committed to a camp community custody program. Anthony’s story was not altogether different. An unwitting participant in the world’s largest juvenile justice system he was arrested on drug charges. Research shows that black and Latino youth have drug use rates that are roughly the same as whites, but are targeted for arrest disproportionately (Alexander 2010). Today I know that Anthony was a victim of the War on Drugs, tough on crime policies put in place during the Nixon administration. At the time I was more concerned with his rotting teeth and made a point to tell his probation officer that he needed to see a dentist.

There’s no bail for minors, so both Keith and Anthony were taken straight to juvenile hall for pre-trial detention where thousands of youth await placement.<sup>4</sup> The boys endured a strip search for drugs, provided blood and urine samples, and were given a change of clothes before they were told that their rights amounted to little more than three meals a day. Too tough to let on that they were scared, they waited for someone to come and take them home. However, distance and

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<sup>3</sup> “Comprehensive Multi-Agency Juvenile Justice Plan.” Los Angeles County Juvenile Justice Coordinating Council. March 20, 2001.

<sup>4</sup> I believe both boys were housed at Barry J. Nidorf (aka Sylmar), 1 of 3 detention centers in Los Angeles County.

inadequate public transportation make it difficult for impoverished families to visit incarcerated relatives in facilities located in rural areas, so it's unlikely that the boys had visitors. Eventually they were taken to 1 of 10 Juvenile courthouses where they probably didn't meet their lawyers until minutes before the trial started. Distraught, their mothers would have made every effort to be there and would have cried in court when the judge, who also acted as jury, sentenced their sons to time at Camp Kilpatrick. As it was with Keith and Anthony, the average detainee has been before a judge five times before they are sentenced to camp. Violent youth are tried as adults and serve time in California Youth Authority (CYA) facilities. Keith and Anthony were moderate offenders by comparison, and Kilpatrick was likely the best-case scenario under these worst-case circumstances.

The same year that I met Keith and Anthony, Angela Davis used the term "prison-industrial-complex" for the first time, attributing the country's exploding prison population to for-profit business practices (2001). No doubt drawing from her own experiences as a prisoner in the sixties, Davis and others shed light on atrocious conditions within the United States prison system. Several years later, Sociologist David Garland coined the phrase "mass imprisonment," referring to the disproportionate rate of incarceration of minority groups in the contemporary United States (US) (2001). A fundamental fact in the US, mass incarceration refers to both an accelerated rate of imprisonment as well as the locking up of entire segments of the population.<sup>5</sup> In 2001, Loic Wacquant called the growing confinement of African-American males the fourth stage of racial domination after the ghetto, segregation, and slavery (2001). More recently, Michelle Alexander called this same phenomenon *The New Jim Crow* in her book by the same name (2010). The particulars of this historical period demand transparency, but during this time, according to Wacquant, there has been a decline in ethnographic accounts depicting the everyday lives of prisoners. Sixties social movements and the Attica uprising led to groundbreaking, ethnographic field studies and a rich tradition of prison writing by inmates. Yet, the trend did not last (Wacquant 2002). Instead, imprisonment gradually replaced social programs as a strategy for regulating the poor, and Americans witnessed the jettisoning of the philosophy of rehabilitation. Sociologists also encountered problems of access. Prisons became impossible to penetrate. The social and professional organization of academic life mandated reviews by Human Subjects Committees, and in California a 1996 law put a media ban on interviewing prisoners. In this context my ethnographic study of Camp Kilpatrick takes on new importance.

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<sup>5</sup> David Garland defined the mass imprisonment society as having two features: first, "a rate of imprisonment that is markedly above the historical and comparative norm for societies of this type," and second, "the social concentration of imprisonment effects," such that incarceration "ceases to be incarceration of individual offenders and becomes the systematic imprisonment of whole groups of the population" (2001, p. 5-6).



In graduate school I learned about the steady rise in the US prison population—from 300,000 in 1981 to over 2.3 million today—which provided a statistical base for numerous theoretical and empirical studies seeking to explain the rise and development of the prison system (Alexander 2010). ‘Tough on crime’ policies put in place during the 1980s offer some context to the surge. The desire for monetary gain led to the growth of the prison industry and the ever-growing number of incarcerated individuals; motivated by profit rather than rehabilitating criminals or reducing crime rates, businesses and other for-profit organizations involved themselves in the construction, operation, and promotion of correctional facilities and the services they provide. The fallout from the increasing number of incarcerations—post-prison joblessness and felony disenfranchisement—spurred even more research. *Marked* by Devah Pager describes the processes by which prisoners are disproportionately denied jobs after their release (2007). Likewise, *Locked Out* by Jeff Manza and Christopher Uggen quantifies the effects imprisonment has on the electoral process through felony disenfranchisement laws (2006). Conversely, *Golden Gulag* debunks the prison-for-profit theory beginning with the premise that most are publicly owned. Focusing on California Ruth Wilson Gilmore demonstrates how the state built prisons at an exponential rate to fill gaps in unemployment, land use, and public funding (2007).<sup>6</sup> In retrospect, it’s easy to see how Keith and Anthony’s lives fit into the narrative of mass incarceration. One of the primary effects of imprisonment is a high rate of recidivism explained in part by low rates of post-prison employment for minority applicants (Pager 2007); 70% of California’s adult inmates were incarcerated during their youth with Los Angeles County’s juvenile detention facilities serving as the most popular alma mater.

Increasing visibility, a major part of modern social control, reaches beyond the normalization of prison design’s components and operation. An extension of what Michel Foucault calls a carceral network, the internet provides information about incarcerated persons who do not know they are being watched and cannot see back (Foucault 1975). Typed on my very first Macintosh, my field notes remind me that Keith and Anthony were imprisoned during the exponential growth and mass consumption of personal computers. The concept of a digital divide, the effect of social class on access to and knowledge of technology, suggests that Keith and Anthony lack computer literacy. For privileged members of society like me information about prisoners is relatively easy to find online. My notes provide enough biographical information about the boys to begin a Google search.

I spent days trying to find Anthony before giving up and turning my sights to Keith. Using Inmate Locator, a California state search engine, I found a prisoner with Keith’s full name, but twenty years older than he would be today. There were other false starts before I came across local news stories about a crime

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<sup>6</sup> In 2009 California’s state, county, and local facilities averaged 253,000 adult inmates per day.

and arrest made on November 8, 2011. I checked Mugshot.com and found a photo of a man who looked vaguely familiar. My field notes corroborated other information provided on the website: the prisoner's birthdate, height (6 feet 5 inches) and a tattoo (Keith's brother's name). Saddened, but not surprised, I entered Keith's name into the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department Inmate Information Center database and found the following: Keith had two prior convictions, a robbery in 2001 and an assault with the intent to commit a felony in 2004. He was out of jail for a few months before his most recent arrest. Keith was in detention awaiting sentencing; he pleaded no contest and was being held on one million dollar bail. His next court date was scheduled for July 2012, where prosecutors would ask for a state prison sentence of more than twelve years. Today he's serving that time in a California State Prison and won't be released until he is in his early 40s. When I last saw Keith he was 15; he's been locked up ever since—nearly half of his life. During that same period I graduated with honors from UCLA and earned my Ph.D. It seems our brief connection was outweighed by our social differences.

My service-learning experience at Kilpatrick was positive and life-changing. My college years were filled with opportunities culminating in my acceptance to a graduate program at an Ivy League school. Kilpatrick continues to influence my pedagogical choices. I emphasize personal development, civic engagement, original research, and reflective practice in the courses that I teach today. My field notes remind me of my privileged status but also have me wondering about the boys and the mark that our tutoring sessions left on them. I want to believe that they made a difference, but I doubt it. Paradoxically the largest juvenile justice system in the world seems to have made no difference and all of the difference in the boys' life chances. I consider digging deeper, finding Anthony and contacting Keith, interviewing them, and perhaps writing a book. My field notes inspire a host of research ideas. They also present a crucial, novice account, one that was lost as I found myself immersed in a graduate program, more and more constricted by professionalization processes and institutional review boards. Yet, my ability to critically analyze past events is a direct result of rigorous post-secondary training. In the end I decide that the boundaries within which my fieldwork was accomplished remain inescapable, constraining my original research but also my subsequent re-analysis (Mauthner 1998). I was just a temporary visitor in Keith and Anthony's world; I could leave whenever I wanted to and I did. Now, too much time has passed to return. I received high marks for my term paper cumbersomely titled *The Mortification of the Self as an Incomplete Process: Attempts to Avert Institutional Cultural Victory*, and I earned the same grade for the course, strengthening my near perfect grade-point-average. While doors were opening for me, bars were slamming shut behind Keith (and probably Anthony too). Next time before peering through the keyhole, I'll think more carefully about who are the real beneficiaries of service-learning initiatives.

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