

Running Header: Injustice

Injustice and the Self Discovery That Followed

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19 January 2018

A person cannot understand the danger of being in the wrong place at the wrong time, until they end up in the wrong place at the wrong time. It has been through one powerful documentary and three life-changing books that this statement has become engrained in my understanding of the world. Through these literary mediums I have learned about how even a considerably “bullet proof” justice system makes mistakes. Watching professionals attempt to explain how the justice system has gotten so out of hand and reading about other peoples’ life stories has made me feel so much pain and anger. Looking down at the pages of *Picking Cotton*, *Drawn to Injustice*, and *I Am Troy Davis* completely altered the amount of power I have understood words to have. One influential film and these three books have enabled me to feel a deep hurt for strangers I will never get the opportunity to meet, they have completely altered the way in which I view the justice system, and stimulated me to continue to challenge the status quo in a society that has become negligent to its shortcomings.

I was introduced to the murky water the justice system resides in for the first time when I watched the documentary *The 13th* on Netflix in the fall of 2016. This documentary argued that the thirteenth amendment (which 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”(Library of Congress)) simply redesigned slavery. It reworked the system so that crime was easier to convict and a those convicted would be treated similar to a time before “Jim Crow.” This documentary focused on the racial marginalization of the “tough on crime movement.” I remember watching this documentary for the first time with my jaw dropped as I stared at the screen wide-eyed. It seemed that somewhere along the way, a justice system created to protect the innocent, transformed into one where the

word “suspect” carries with it the immediate connotation of, “guilty.” This film spoke about seemingly obvious issues and I couldn’t believe this information had not been brought to my attention before.

After I watched this film, I felt the need to “get the word out” on an issue that a blind eye hand been turned to by too many. I This documentary became a hot potato in my life and my desire to toss it off to everyone I knew could not be contained. When I returned to DU for Winter Quarter of 2017 I had enrolled in a speech course. Our final speech required us to persuade our audience about something. Once again I tracked back to *The 13th* documentary. I informed my fellow students about the shortcomings of the justice system. I reminded them that together we can hold our justice system accountable, return the rights to the accused, and uphold the phrase, “all accused are innocent until proven guilty.”

My interest in the criminal justice system was once again revitalized when I strolled into my Wrongful Conviction course in the fall of 2017. I knew I had an innate curiosity for the particulars of crime and justice, but I had no clue just how much my desire to understand the details of this systems misfortunes would grow in the course of 10 short weeks. During class Professor Phillips introduced me to realities I was astonished by. The first day of class he explained that even if the justice system was accurate 99% of the time there could still be 15,000 innocent men and women ending up behind bars when 1.5 million people are getting locked up. I couldn’t believe the numbers I was being told. As a person who had no experience in jail and with my families in jail, those words left me feeling personally offended. It was in the midst of these statistics that I felt my understanding of society expand.

The classroom facts left me in a state of shock every class, but it was when I started reading *Picking Cotton: Our Memoir of Injustice and Redemption* that I began to realize the

human impact of the startling facts I was learning in class and just how easily a wrongful conviction can occur. This book details the night Jennifer Thompson Cannino was raped in her North Carolina home. The book continues to take the reader on a journey through the trial and conviction of a man. The storyline follows the convicted man through over ten years in prison before her real perpetrator confesses to the crime and DNA evidence sets the wrongfully convicted man free. Uniquely this book was written by both the victim, Jennifer Thompson-Cannino, and the wrongfully convicted man, Ronald Cotton. The two points of view tell strikingly different stories. This book made my chest tighten with anger. My heart-broke when Jennifer detailed the horrors she faced the night of her attack and my heart sank into the pit of my stomach when, an innocent, Ronald Cotton recollects the moment he heard the words “guilty” drop unmistakably from the judge’s mouth in the court room. The justice system failed both Jennifer and Ronald in the wake of Jennifer’s assault.

This book detailed not only the horrific misfortunes both Jennifer and Ronald faced, but told a far more impactful story of the road to forgiveness. In the wake of Ronald Cotton’s exoneration from prison he and Jennifer agreed to meet. Jennifer expressed the guilt she felt and felt no amount of apologies would suffice. After all, it was her testimony that was the sole evidence against Ronald. I felt her apology, but I also know had it been me I would have felt confined by anger. Ronald, though, forgave her openly and completely. It was in that moment of reading that I felt the true power of forgiveness. Through forgiveness, I witnessed an unbearable weight lifted off both these victim’s shoulders. The two began a friendship that started with forgiveness. It inspired them to fight for criminal justice reform on greater platforms. This incredibly honest and painful story introduced me to two figures I have so much respect for and aspire to create change alongside.

The horror covered in *Picking Cotton: Our Memoir of Injustice and Redemption* was deep and complex, and yet it was just the tip of the iceberg. Throughout the rest of the quarter in the Wrongful Conviction course we continued to delve deeper and deeper into injustice. The next book *Drawn to Injustice* highlighted prosecutorial misconduct and introduced me to a truly evil side of the police force. The personal account of Timothy Masters unveiled a justice system so determined to lock someone away, they would knowingly put the wrong guy behind bars. This book expanded my literacy understanding of good and bad. The justice system, I now realize, exists on a grey scale. It's true that noble citizens can be found locking the guilty citizens away. The same is true that a criminal can exist in a blue suit and hold the keys as an innocent person sits behind bars. It was after reading this book that I began setting my sights on a new career path. I care for the underdogs of the world and this book further enforced my inclination to speak up for the silenced voices.

It was when I read *I Am Troy Davis* that all the near misses that protected me in the last books failed me. It was in this book my understanding of the justice system reached an all new high and my feelings towards it reached an all new low. This book detailed the trial, conviction, and eventually the execution of a man who may have very well not convicted the murder he was put to death for. This book had no happy ending, and challenged me to find truth in a case that concluded with so many questions. As a reader I was left with a shadow of a doubt about Troy's guilt and ached as I read his life come to an end. Troy Davis' story moved people from here in the United States, (including Jennifer Thompson-Cannino and Ronald Cotton) all the way across the globe and left me sobbing. It was a painful feeling Troy's hope when the tides seemed to be turning, when I knew very well how the book would end. The pain I felt in this book was my ultimate call to action.

These literary experiences have my goals in my future endeavors. I would one day like to pursue a career in non-profits that help those who have previously been incarcerated. I found that our mentor text by Drucker aligned well with what I have discovered in my literacy experiences exhibited in this piece. When he mentions, “I have never seen anything done well unless people were committed” (Drucker, page 7) I understood his position. In all of the injustices I have been inadvertently affected by there were so many committed family, friends, and even strangers that worked endlessly to see justice prevail. Even when the happy ending wasn’t realized, movements were sparked and greater change was created by the committed.

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