

ENGL 275: JUSTICE AND LITERATURE



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Language gave me a way to keep the chaos of prison at bay and prevent it from devouring me.
Jimmy Santiago Baca, *A Place to Stand*

Hopelessness is the enemy of justice.
Bryan Stevenson

COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course is a reading-intensive study of the literature and culture of imprisonment. Our guiding questions will be conceptual, literary, and historical. For instance,

What is justice?
Does writing by imprisoned people constitute a literary genre or literary tradition?
How and why did the United States come to lead the world in incarceration?

To answer these (and other) questions, we will read twentieth-century and contemporary US American literature written mainly by imprisoned and formerly imprisoned people. These writers provide imaginative access, through essays, novels, poems, and plays, to a locked-down environment. Often addressed to an outside audience, these works describe the degradation of incarceration, offer insight into the alliance between penal systems and private industry, reflect on what is meant (and not meant) by “criminal behavior,” and identify resources for survival and transformation.

We will also consider what it means to “do time.” The penitentiary was designed with death in mind. The idea was this: Isolated in a cell, chastened by silence, disciplined by labor, the

imprisoned subject would reflect and become penitent, journey through death and rejoin the human family, reborn, rehabilitated. It pretty much never worked that way. (According to Michel Foucault, it was never meant to work that way.) We will work to understand the history of the modern prison, the persistence of racial disparities in criminal sentencing, and our present precarious moment.

ENGL 275 is a SpeakWrite course designed to strengthen your written and oral communication skills. This course also has a service-learning component that will require six hours of volunteer work at the Appalachian Prison Book Project (APBP) or another justice site of your choosing.

Contents of Syllabus

1. Required Texts
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1. Required Texts

H. Bruce Franklin, ed., *Prison Writing in 20th-century America* (anthology)
John Wideman, *Brothers and Keepers* (memoir)
Jessica Blank and Eric Jensen, *The Exonerated* (play)
R. Dwayne Betts, *A Question of Freedom* (memoir)

Required Texts Available on ECampus

Douglas Blackmon, from *Slavery By Another Name*
Michel Foucault, from *Discipline and Punish*
Bell Chevigny, ed., selections from *Doing Time: 25 Years of Prison Writing*
 Paul St. John, "Behind the Mirror"; Kathy Boudin, "Trilogy of Journeys"
Leonard Peltier, from *My Life is My Sun Dance*
Jarvis Jay Masters, from *That Bird Has My Wings*
Michelle Alexander, from *The New Jim Crow: Mass Imprisonment in the Age of Colorblindness*
Steve Earle, "Ellis Unit One"
Caleb Smith, from *Prison and the American Imagination*
Paul Butler, from *Let's Get Free: A Hip-Hop Theory of Justice*

2. Grade Distribution and Grading Scale

- | | |
|------------------------|----|
| ✓ Two 6-page essays | 60 |
| ✓ Four short responses | 20 |
| ✓ Class participation | 20 |
| ✓ Service-learning | 10 |

A+	100-98	A	97-92	A-	91-90
B+	89-88	B	87-82	B-	81-80
C+	79-78	C	77-72	C-	71-70
D+	69-68	D	67-62	D-	61-60
F	below 59				

3. Class Participation and Attendance: Our Environment

A Word on Content

The subjects of crime, criminalization, imprisonment, and re-entry can be difficult to discuss. I set a high bar for thoughtful and civil exchange. We do not have to agree with one another—I welcome lively discussion and dissent—but we must be able to listen and respond meaningfully to one another. (Emotion is part of intellectual discovery, so we will not panic if it enters our scene.)

Our readings offer perspectives on incarceration from those who have survived it, and not survived it. Feel free to bring materials and ideas to class that challenge or complicate our readings. You can also post materials on the ECampus discussion page.

If you ever have any concerns about our conversations, please let me know.

Class Participation

This class will strengthen your ability *to think*—to question, analyze, reflect, dispute, and reason. Dialogue is essential to this process. If this course were only about reading, we could all do that by ourselves. If it were only about listening to what one person has to say about literature, we could all find a great lecture on video. But English courses are about more than reading and writing and the acquisition of information. They are also about learning to think analytically and creatively and in conversation with others.

I realize that uncertainty, anxiety, disagreement, and boredom can lead to silence in the classroom. I know that is not easy for all students to contribute. Still, that is my goal—that we hear from everyone.

There will be many ways to participate. I will often ask if anyone has a question to begin our discussion or a quotation to write on the board. You are welcome to read from written responses. Taking initiative in small groups will also contribute toward participation, as will visiting my office hours.

At any point, you can ask me about your participation points.

Attendance Policy

You are allowed three absences for whatever reason. If you miss more than three classes, unless there is a documented emergency, you will need to make an appointment to speak with me or you will fail the class. (See emergency policy below.) Please consider carefully whether this is the class for you.

Three tardy arrivals (more than five minutes late) will count as one absence.

Always be prepared for class. Please bring with you the literary work under discussion.

Cell Phone Courtesy. Please turn off phones unless we are doing a directed assignment.

Inclusivity Statement. The West Virginia University community is committed to creating and fostering a positive learning and working environment based on open communication, mutual respect, and inclusion.

If you are a person with a disability and anticipate needing any type of accommodation in order to participate in this class, please advise me and make appropriate arrangements with the Office of Accessibility Services. Accessibility Services is located in Suite 250 at 1085 Van Voorhis Rd (beside Applebee's and across from the Mountaineer Station transportation center). 304-293-6700; access2@mail.wvu.edu; <http://accessibilityservices.wvu.edu/>.

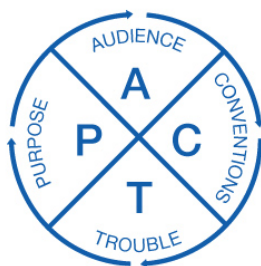
Emergencies or Health Crises. If you have an emergency or serious health problem in the course of the semester, once you have the opportunity, you should contact the Office of Student Life in E. Moore Hall (293-5611). The Dean of Student Life will communicate with me. Please reserve the Dean's services for serious circumstances.

4. Service Learning

Each student will devote six hours this semester to a service-learning project. For those interested, I will provide an introduction to the Appalachian Prison Book Project (APBP), a nonprofit that sends books to people imprisoned in six states. This site will connect with all of our coursework, especially the unit on "Education and Liberation."

Please feel free to speak to me about other possibilities for volunteering or consult with the Center for Service and Learning.

5. Writing Requirements



Purpose: What exactly do I want to happen?

Audience: Who is reading, listening, or viewing?

Conventions: What is expected in this context?

Trouble: What could get in the way of my goals?

SpeakWrite

ENGL 275 has been designated as a SpeakWrite course by the Eberly College of Arts and Sciences. As part of Eberly's commitment to fostering effective communication skills, this course will:

- Emphasize informal and formal modes of communication
- Teach discipline-specific communication techniques
- Use a process-based approach to learning that provides opportunities for feedback and revision
- Base 90% of the final grade on successful written and spoken performance

For more information about the SpeakWrite program, visit SpeakWrite.wvu.edu.

Three Reader Responses

You will write three 500-word responses to our readings. This is a chance to gather your thoughts and practice the writing and analytical skills that you will need to compose the essay assignments. Concentrate in the responses on a particular scene, idea, image, or question. There is a sample on ECampus under "Writing Assignments + Guides."

***Responses must include at least three direct quotations from the literary text. Provide the page number in parenthesis after the quote, MLA-style. Please single-space reader responses.

Upload responses on ECampus *before class* on the due dates provided on the schedule.

For one of these responses, you have the option to write a creative response. If you are interested, here are some ideas.

- **Be the Author:** Write an additional scene to one of our works. Your scene should illuminate an important question or insight about the original. You can create a scene that would occur within, before, or after the text proper.
- **Create a dialogue:** Imagine a conversation between two characters. The characters could be from the same or from different literary works. Again, be sure that your creative dialogue offers an important insight into the original.
- **An Interview:** Imagine an interview with a character or the author of one of our works. Explain who is conducting the interview, where, when, etc. Your creative interview should help us to define key terms, understand difficult concepts, or make sense of a confusing part of the work.
- **Write a Letter:** Compose a letter to an author or one of the characters. This letter should discuss a real question you have about the original and work toward a meaningful argument or observation.

If you have another idea for a creative response, just run it by me.

One Response to Service-Learning Experience

You will write one 500-word reflection on your experience at the Appalachian Prison Book Project or another service-learning site. This response will enable you to make connections between your site placement and the course reading.

Two Essays

You will write two 6-page essays on literary works we have discussed in class. I will collect drafts of each essay. You will have an opportunity to revise and to read the work of other students. See criteria and recommendations below.

Evaluative Criteria for Essays

The **criteria** for evaluating your essays will be the following:

- A complete draft that engages with a difficult, original, or complex question
- A detailed outline
- A revision that demonstrates a reworking of the draft in terms of argument, content, style, and organization
- A clear thesis or insight, which is suitably complex and provides a blueprint for the essay
- Smooth and grammatical integration of primary sources
- Solid evidence from literary works (in the form of quotations, paraphrases, and summaries) to support your interpretations
- Strong transitions that move the essay forward logically and thoughtfully
- A polished final essay free of grammatical and surface errors.
- Consistent use of MLA style for documentation.

Important Reminders

- **Incorporate quotes gracefully.** Provide a set-up so that the quotation makes sense. Review the handout on how to incorporate quotations into your sentences.
- **Make a detailed outline.** This step is crucial. You will need to have a strong, precise thesis statement and a deliberate organization with excellent transitions between each major point.
- **Show off what you know about the literary work.** Ground your argument in specific moments and direct quotes from the story, play, or memoir.
- Can you answer the “**So what?**” question? Why does your essay matter?
- Provide parenthetical citations and a Works Cited page properly formatted.

Need Writing Help? The Eberly Studio -- a free tutoring service for WVU students -- is located in G02 Colson Hall. Tutors are available to help with any writing project in any course. The Center specializes in helping students with brainstorming, drafting, and revising their work.

Phone: (304) 293-5788

Call for Evansdale and evening hours

http://english.wvu.edu/centers_and_projects/wcenter/writing_center_home

Upcoming Contest

A student writing competition will be part of an upcoming WVU celebration of the writing of Pearl S. Buck. There will be a \$1,000 cash award for winners at the graduate and undergraduate levels. Entries can be either creative or scholarly, and don't need to be about Buck specifically, but should address one or more of the following general themes:

- 1) Expression of appreciation for difference and different cultures, including but not limited to Appalachia and China;
- 2) Social justice;
- 3) Women's perspectives.

6. English Major Program Goals

Upon completing a B.A. in English, a student should be able to:

1. Interpret texts within diverse literary, cultural, and historical contexts.
2. Demonstrate a general knowledge of the social and structural aspects of the English language.
3. Demonstrate a range of contextually effective writing strategies.

7. Course Objectives

Explore the meanings of justice through a study of American prison literature
Study the genre and development of American prison literature
Compose compelling essays guided by logic and creativity
Strengthen written and oral communication skills
Evaluate how concepts such as PACT (purpose, audience, conventions, and trouble spots) inform communication practices in our discipline
Build a challenging and cooperative intellectual community
Engage meaningfully in a related service-learning project

8. Learning Outcomes

Upon successful completion of this class, students should be able to:

- Define justice based on analysis of literary works
- Demonstrate an understanding of the genre "prison literature"
- Identify thematic patterns and shared forms in the literature
- Write logical and thesis-driven essays
- Compose detailed responses to literary works
- Express ideas clearly in discussion and respond thoughtfully to the ideas of others

9. Intellectual Honesty

Plagiarism/Cheating. The following definitions are from the *West Virginia University Undergraduate Catalog*. Please see the section on Academic Integrity and Dishonesty for the full definition and discussion of procedures.

Plagiarism: material that has been knowingly obtained or copied in whole or in part, from the work of others . . . including (but not limited to) another individual's academic composition.

Cheating: doing academic work for another student, or providing one's own work for another student to copy and submit as his / her own.

Scholastic dishonesty: involves misrepresenting as your own work any part of work done by another; submitting the same paper or substantially similar papers to meet the requirements of more than one course without the written approval and consent of all instructors concerned; depriving another student of necessary course materials; interfering with another's work.

Clear cases of plagiarism or cheating may result in an F for the course. If you have any question about how to document sources, please talk to me.

ECampus and Email

Many course materials are available on eCampus. I will use your MIX email accounts to communicate with you. Please check those accounts regularly.

On ECampus, you are welcome to post news articles and other material related to our studies. Contributing to online discussions will count toward class participation.

SCHEDULE

- Tues Jan 12 Introductions. Syllabus
- Heather Thompson, "Why Mass Incarceration Matters," *Journal of American History* (Dec 2010)
- In class: Interview with D. Blackmon on *Slavery By Another Name*
<http://www.slaverybyanothername.com/> (Moyers @ .50)
- Leadbelly, "Midnight Special"
Midnight Express Books <http://midnightexpressbooks.com/>

PRISON LABOR: The Exception Clause

Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States.
13th Amendment of the US Constitution

- Thurs Jan 14 *Prison Writing*, Tom Wicker, preface (xi-xv)
Prison Writing, Bruce Franklin, Introduction (1-17)
Prison Writing, Anonymous, "Autobiography of an Imprisoned Peon"
(21-29)
Douglas Blackmon, excerpt from *Slavery By Another Name* [ECampus]
- Tues Jan 19 Michel Foucault, excerpt from *Discipline and Punish* [ECampus]
- Thurs Jan 21 *Prison Writing*, "Songs of the Prison Plantation" (29-34)
On Austin Reed's *The Life and Adventures of a Haunted Convict, or the Inmate of a Gloomy Prison*
<http://www.mhpbooks.com/random-house-buys-rights-to-uneearthed-1850s-prison-memoir/>
- Recommended: Monica Fluharty, "Carceral Topography" [ECampus]
- Tues Jan 26 *Prison Writing*, Jack London, "'Pinched': A Prison Experience" + "Pen"
Pictures of Erie PA Penitentiary
http://www.wnyheritagepress.org/photos_week_2012/jack_londen_pen/jack_londen_pen.htm
- Theodore Hamm, Review of Franklin's anthology [ECampus]
Caleb Smith, excerpt from *Prison and the American Imagination*

(ECampus)

Recommended: Sarah Haley, “ ‘Like I Was A Man’: Chain Gangs, Gender, and the Domestic Carceral Sphere in Jim Crow Georgia,” *Signs* 39.1 (Autumn 2013).

1st Reader Response Due (to any of our readings thus far)

Thurs Jan 28

Prison Writing, Chester Himes, “To What Red Hell?” (119-129)

Recommended: Nancy Kurshan, “Women and Imprisonment in the US” [ECampus]

Tues Feb 2

Prison Writing, Kate Richards O’Hare, *Crime and Criminals* (73-89)
Bring two observations and/or questions about O’Hare’s writing

Visit APBP—Meet at the Aull Center during class time (351 Spruce St., next to downtown public library)

In-Class: First Essay Assignment

LIFE SENTENCES AND SOLITARY

Thurs Feb 4

Wideman, *Brothers and Keepers* (1-58)

Tues Feb 9

Brothers and Keepers (59-120)

Thurs Feb 11

Brothers and Keepers (121-166)

2nd Reader Response Due (to any of our readings since Jan 26)

Tues Feb 16

Brothers and Keepers (169-end)
Eugene Phillip Page, “Familiar Strangers” [ECampus]

Doran Larson, “Why Scandinavian Prisons Are Superior”
<http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2013/09/why-scandinavian-prisons-are-superior/279949/>

Thurs Feb 18

Prison Writing, Jack Abbott & Norman Mailer, from *In the Belly of the Beast*
Prison Writing, Etheridge Knight (230-233)

Draft of First Essay Due over this weekend—staggered deadlines

- Tues Feb 23 *Prison Writing*, Patricia McConnell, “Sing Soft, Sing Loud” (294-306)
Guantánamo Diary
[http://www.democracynow.org/2015/1/22/inside the us torture chambers prisoners](http://www.democracynow.org/2015/1/22/inside_the_us_torture_chambers_prisoners)
- Janet Reitman, “Inside Gitmo: America’s Shame.” *Rolling Stones*
<http://www.rollingstone.com/politics/news/inside-gitmo-americas-shame-20151230?page=16>
- Lisa Guenther, “Why solitary confinement degrades us all”
<https://aeon.co/essays/why-solitary-confinement-degrades-us-all>
- Photographs requested by men in TAMMS supermaximum:
http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/09/20/solitary-confinement-phot_n_3950622.html?utm_hp_ref=arts
- Thurs Feb 25 Judee Norton, “Norton #59900” [ECampus]
Prison Writing, Kathy Boudin (329-334) and “Trilogy of Journeys” (Ecampus)
- Alcatraz Installation by Al Weiwei
<http://www.cnn.com/2014/10/22/world/ai-weiwei-alcatraz/>
- Performance Art: <http://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/confronting-americas-shameful-mass-incarceration-with-performance-art>
- STATE KILLING**
- Tues Mar 1 Willie Francis, “My Trip to the Chair” [handout]
David Garland, Prologue and Introduction to *Peculiar Institution* [ECampus]
- Recommended: Deborah Denno [ECampus]
- First Essay Due—staggered deadlines**
- Thurs Mar 3 Blank and Jensen, *The Exonerated* 1-45
- Tues Mar 8 *The Exonerated* (entire play)
- Thurs Mar 10 *The Exonerated*

Steve Earle, "Ellis Unit One"

"To Murder Victims' Families Executing Killers is Justice"

<http://www.baltimoresun.com/news/maryland/bal-md.kane05feb05-column.html>

Murder Victims Families for Reconciliation <http://www.mvfr.org/>

Murder Victims Families for Human Rights <http://www.mvfr.org/>

EDUCATION and LIBERATION

Tues Mar 15 *Prison Writing*, Malcolm X, from *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (147-155)

Digital Scholarship: <http://www.brothermalcolm.net/>

David Remnick in *New Yorker*:

<http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2011/04/25/this-american-life>

In-Class: *Make It Plain*

In-Class: Second Essay Assignment

Thurs Mar 17 Paul St. John, "Behind the Mirror," in *Doing Time* (ECampus)

Dylan Rodriguez, from *Forced Passages*

http://rebeccaginsburg.net/Rebecca_Ginsburg/Social_Justice_files/rodriguez_ch2_forced_passages.pdf

Recommended: Megan Sweeney, Chapter One from *Reading Is My Window* [ECampus]

Spring Break

Tues Mar 29 Dwayne Betts, *A Question of Freedom* Part One (1-89)

Thurs Mar 31 *A Question of Freedom* Part Two (90-172)

3rd Reader Response Due (to any of our readings since Feb 16)

Tues Apr 5 *A Question of Freedom* Part 3 (173-233)

Thurs Apr 7 *A Question of Freedom* Epilogue

Jimmy Santiago Baca, "Coming Into Language" (ECampus)

Baca, "Past Present" in *Prison Writing*

Modern American Poetry

http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/a_f/baca/baca.htm

The Poetry Foundation <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/jimmy-santiago-baca>

Recommended: Conversation with Angela Davis and Toni Morrison
<http://www.filmsforaction.org/watch/angela-davis-and-toni-morrison-in-conversation-literacy-libraries-and-liberation/#.VHxnc3tjNK0.facebook>

POLITICAL PRISONERS

Tues Apr 12 Martin Luther King, "Letter from Birmingham Jail"
http://mlk.kpp01.stanford.edu/kingweb/liberation_curriculum/pdfs/letterfrom_birmingham_wwcw.pdf

Doran Larson, "Toward a Prison Poetics," *College Literature* 37.3 (2010).

Thurs Apr 14 *Prison Writing*, from *Assata* by Assata Shakur

Beth Ritchie, Chapter 5, "The Matrix: A Black Feminist Response" in *Arrested Justice* [WVU Electronic Resource]

FBI announcement 40 years after arrest, May 2013
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IFla0IsgkIM>

Recommended: Joy James, "Framing the Panther: Assata Shakur and Black Female Agency" in *Want to Start a Revolution? Radical Women in the Black Freedom Struggle*, eds. Jeanne Theoharis, Komozi Woodard, and Dayo F. Gore. (New York: NYU Press, 2009).

<http://humanities.williams.edu/joy-james/>

Tues Apr 19 Leonard Peltier, from *My Life is My Sun Dance* (ECampus)
John Wideman, Introduction, *Live from Death Row* [ECampus]
Mumia Abu-Jamal, from *Live from Death Row* [ECampus]

Recommended:

Che Gossett, "Abolitionist Imaginings" (Interview with Bo Brown, Reina Gossett, and Dylan Rodriguez) [ECampus]

Draft of Second Essay Due -- staggered deadlines

NEW VISIONS

Thurs Apr 21

“A Conservative Case for Prison Reform”

http://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/10/opinion/a-conservative-case-for-prison-reform.html?_r=0

Paul Butler, “Safety First: Why Mass Incarceration Matters,” chapter 2 “The Beautiful Struggle: Seven Ways to Take Back Justice” in *Let’s Get Free* (ECampus)

Michelle Alexander, from *The New Jim Crow* (ECampus)

<http://newjimcrow.com/>

In-class: Interview on Bill Moyers

<http://billmoyers.com/segment/michelle-alexander-locked-out-of-the-american-dream/>

Kanye West, “New Slaves”

Recommended: Mumia Abu Jamal’s Commencement address

<http://www.prisonradio.org/media/audio/mumia/goddard-commencement-speech-1054-mumia-abu-jamal>

Optional: Friday April 22 Visit to Hazelton for Think Tank

Tues Apr 26

Jarvis Jay Masters, from *That Bird Has My Wings* (ECampus)

Joseph Margulies, “The Limits of Criminal Justice Reform”

<http://bostonreview.net/us/joseph-margulies-criminal-justice-transformation>

Response to Service-Learning Project Due

Thurs Apr 28

Concluding Thoughts

Second Essay due—staggered deadlines