

## ENG 693B: The Penalty of Death in 20<sup>th</sup>-c. American Literature (Fall 2011)

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Office Hours: Tues/Thursday 11:30-12:30 and by appointment

Now they're testin' the trap and it chills my spine 11 more minutes to go  
And the trap and the rope, aw they work just fine 10 more minutes to go  
Well, I'm waitin' for the pardon that'll set me free with 9 more minutes to go  
But this ain't the movies so forget about me 8 more minutes to go

--Johnny Cash, "25 minutes To Go"

Since the colonial period, over 15,000 people have been legally executed in the United States. The gallows once drew crowds of thousands to witness the righteous authority of the government and the wretched status of the condemned. With the movement away from public executions, beginning in the North in the 1830s and continuing through the early part of the twentieth century in the South, and accelerated in the South by the use of the electric chair, the state consolidated its control over killing scenes. This semester we will study 20<sup>th</sup>-century and contemporary US literary works that address capital cases and death-row experiences.

Writers have been a vital part of U.S. death penalty history, contributing novels, plays, songs, poems, essays, letters, and memoirs to the national debate. Strategies for writers opposed to executions include the activation of sympathy for the condemned, a focus on the unequal application of the penalty, a stress on connections between lynchings and legal killings, dramatization of wrongful convictions, and an appeal to democratic principles and to human rights. We will analyze these strategies and artistic efforts as we also study the history and philosophy of state killing.

Capital punishment is a charged and controversial practice. Most of the readings I have selected express opposition to state killing. I hope that our conversations will include other perspectives and positions. My goal is that we will have lively, thoughtful discussions as we outline a 20<sup>th</sup>-century literary history of the death penalty and decide for ourselves how and why (or if) this literature matters today.

### LITERARY WORKS (\*indicates text will be provided)

Herman Melville, *Billy Budd* (novel)

Sophie Treadwell, *Machinal* (play)

\*Langston Hughes, *Scottsboro, Limited* (play)

Harper Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird* (novel)

Richard Wright, *Native Son* (novel)

\*Willie Francis, "My Trip to the Chair" (pamphlet)

Ernest Gaines, *A Lesson Before Dying* (novel)

Caryl Chessman, *Cell 2455, Death Row: A Condemned Man's Own Story*.

Norman Mailer, *Executioner's Song* (novel)

Jill McDonough, *Habeas Corpus* (poems)

Jessica Blank and Erik Jensen, *The Exonerated* (play)

Mumia Abu Jamal, *Live From Death Row* (essays)

### REQUIREMENTS

#### 1) Reader Responses

On our listserve, everyone will post at least six responses (approximately 500 – 750 words, about every other week) to our readings. Your reader response does not need to touch on everything you have read for a particular week. It is usually wise to focus on one text and to choose one idea, image, quotation, or question to develop. Pace your responses throughout the semester and try to post by at least 4PM on

Monday, so we all have a chance to read the responses before we meet on Tuesday. Please bring me a hardcopy.

## **2) Writing Projects**

Your first major written project will be a research essay (approx. 10 pp) that develops a critical or theoretical argument based on material we have read. I will collect brief proposals (250-500 words) about two weeks before the due date, and we will have an in-class writing workshop the week before the final essay is due.

For the second major project, you can compose another 10-page research essay or continue with your first one to create a 20 - 25-page paper.

## **3) Resident Experts**

Everyone will have a chance to be a Resident Expert for one class period. On your assigned day, you will offer a ten-minute presentation at the beginning of class. To prepare and assist with your presentation, I would like you to compile an annotated bibliography for your literary work. In order to compile a useful bibliography, you will need to skim a number of articles and books. You do not have to read the works in their entirety; rather, you need to glean for us the main subject, approach, range and depth of the research. Each entry should be about 150 words. Use MLA style for the citation and include approximately 10 entries.

Please post your annotated bibliography on the listserv and bring me a hardcopy. (If you would like, you can also bring hard copies for the class.) See this website for more information on annotated bibliographies.

<http://www.library.cornell.edu/olinuris/ref/research/skill28.htm>

## **4) Discussion**

I will do my best to create an atmosphere in which everyone feels comfortable speaking and asking questions. Please feel free at any point to visit my office hours or make an appointment to talk with me.

## **GRADE BREAKDOWN**

First Essay	30%
Second Essay	30%
Reader Responses	20%
Participation / Resident Expert	20%

## **ADDITIONAL REQUIRED READING**

### **E-Reserves**

David Brion Davis, *From Homicide to Slavery: Studies in American Culture*. New York: Oxford, 1986. Chapters 2 and 3.

David Garland, *The Peculiar Institution: America's Death Penalty in an Age of Abolition*. Belknap, 2010. 1-39.

Kristin Boudreau, from *Spectacle of Death: Populist Literary Responses to American Capital Cases*. New York: Prometheus, 2006. Preface 11-14; Introduction 19-35.

Austin Sarat, *When the State Kills: Capital Punishment and the American Condition*. Princeton UP, 2001.

Deborah Denno, "When Willie Francis Died: The 'Disturbing' Story Behind One of the Eighth Amendment's Most Enduring Standards of Risk," *Death Penalty Stories*, eds. John H. Blume and Jordan M. Steiker. New York: Foundation Press, 2009. 17-41.

Alex Kozinski, "Tinkering with Death," *Debating the Death Penalty: Should America Have Capital Punishment? The Experts on Both Sides Make Their Best Case*, eds. Hugo Bedau and

- Paul Cassell.
- Angela Davis, *Abolition Democracy : Beyond Empire, Prisons, and Torture*. New York: Seven Stories, 2005. 19-47
- Jarvis Jay Masters, from *Finding Freedom: Writings from Death Row* Padma Publishing, 1997. 63-78.
- George Ryan, "I Will Not Stand For It," *Writing for Their Lives: Death Row U.S.A.* ed. Marie Mulvey-Roberts. Urbana: U of Illinois, 2007. 17-25.
- Jackie Ruzas, "Easy to Kill," *Doing Time: 25 Years of Prison Writing*, ed. Bell Gale Chevigny. New York: Arcade, 2000.
- Judith Clark, "Write a poem that makes no sense," *Doing Time: Doing Time: 25 Years of Prison Writing*, ed. Bell Gale Chevigny. New York: Arcade, 2000.
- Robin Lee Row, "Open Letter from Idaho's Only Female Death Row Prisoner," *Writing for Their Lives: Death Row U.S.A.* ed. Marie Mulvey-Roberts. Urbana: U of Illinois, 2007. 260-269.

### **RECOMMENDED READING**

- Caleb Smith, *The Prison and the American Imagination*
- Paul Christian Jones, *Against the Gallows: Antebellum American Writers and the Death Penalty*
- Michael Hames-García, *Fugitive Thought: Prison Movements, Race, and the Meaning of Justice*
- Joy James, ed. *The New Abolitionists: (Neo)Slave Narratives and Contemporary Prison Writings*
- Daniel Cohen, *Pillars of Salt, Monuments of Grace: New England Crime Literature and the Origins of American Pop Culture, 1674-1860*
- H. Bruce Franklin, ed. *Prison Writing in 20<sup>th</sup>-Century America*
- Philip English Mackey, ed. *Voices Against Death: American Opposition to the Death Penalty*
- Stuart Banner, *The Death Penalty: An American History*
- Louis P. Masur, *Rites of Execution: Capital Punishment and the Transformation of American Culture, 1776-1865*
- Philip English Mackey, *Hanging in the Balance: The Anti-Capital Punishment Movement in New York State, 1776-1861*
- Angela Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?*
- Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*
- Rachel King, *Capital Consequences: Families of the Condemned Tell Their Stories.*
- , *Don't Kill in My Name: Families of Murder Victims Speak Out Against the Death Penalty.*
- Franklin Zimring, *Contradictions of American Capital Punishment*
- D. Quentin Miller, *Prose and Cons: Essays on Prison Literature in the United States*

### **SELECT AUTOBIOGRAPHIES**

- Jarvis Jay Masters, *That Bird Has My Wings: The Autobiography of an Innocent Man on Death Row*
- Steve Champion, *Dead to Deliverance: A Death Row Memoir*
- Wilbert Rideau, *In the Place of Justice: A Story of Punishment and Deliverance*
- Reginald Sinclair Lewis, *Where I'm Writing From*
- Ernie López and Rafael Pérez-Torres, *To Alcatraz, Death Row, and Back*
- Haywood Patterson and Earl Conrad, *Scottsboro Boy*
- Clarence Norris and Sybil D. Washington, *The Last of the Scottsboro Boys: An Autobiography*
- David Dow, *Autobiography of an Execution*

### **RELATED WEBSITES**

- 1) <http://newark.rutgers.edu/~hbf/> H. Bruce Franklin's homepage at Rutgers
- 2) <http://www.pen.org/prison/prisonawards.html> PEN American Center
- 3) <http://www.mvfr.org/index.jsp> Murder Victims' Families for Reconciliation
- 4) <http://www.deathpenaltyinfo.org/> Death Penalty Information Center
- 5) <http://www.un.org/Overview/rights.html> Universal Declaration of Human Rights

- 6) <http://www.italnet.nd.edu/gramsci/> International Gramsci Society
- 7) <http://www.eji.org> Equal Justice Initiative of Alabama
- 8) <http://www.schr.org> Southern Center for Human Rights
- 9) <http://www.criticalresistance.org/> Critical Resistance
- 10) <http://www.prisonlegalnews.org> Monthly newspaper on legal issues
- 11) <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/> US Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics
- 12) [http://soundportraits.org/on-air/witness\\_to\\_an\\_execution/transcript.php](http://soundportraits.org/on-air/witness_to_an_execution/transcript.php). Abramson, Stacy and David Isay, prods. *Witness to an Execution*. 20 Oct. 2000. Radio Interview
- 13) <http://www.thisamericanlife.org/radio-archives/episode/218/act-v>. *This American Life* –Shakespeare in Prisons
- 14) International Centre for Prison Studies <http://www.prisonstudies.org/news/all/137-icps-at-public-conference-in-santiago,-chile.html>

## SCHEDULE

- Aug 23            Introductions  
                    “Witness to an Execution”
- Aug 30            David Garland, from *The Peculiar Institution* (e-reserve)  
                    David Brion Davis, from *From Homicide to Slavery* (e-reserve)  
                    Michel Foucault, from *Discipline and Punish: the Birth of the Modern Prison*. 1975.  
                    Trans. Alan Sheridan. New York: Vintage, 1977. (handout)
- Sept 6            *Billy Budd* (novel)  
                    Bruce Franklin, “*Billy Budd* and Capital Punishment: A Tale of Three Centuries,”  
                    *American Literature*. EBSCO  
                    Kristin Boudreau, from *Spectacle of Death* (e-reserve)
- Sept 13            Langston Hughes, *Scottsboro, Limited* (play; handout)  
                    Sophie Treadwell, *Machinal* (play)  
                    Dwight Conquergood, “Lethal Theatre: Performance, Punishment, and the Death  
                    Penalty.” *Theatre Journal* (2002): 339-367. PROJECT MUSE  
                    Austin Sarat, from *When the State Kills* (e-reserve)
- Recommended:* Dan Carter, *Scottsboro: A Tragedy of the American South*  
                    *Strange Fruit* (documentary film)  
                    *Scottsboro: An American Tragedy* (documentary film)  
                    W.D. Howells, Letters to Editor regarding Haymarket Anarchists
- Announcement:** September 15 – Reading by Ellesa High and Glenn Taylor, 7:30 p.m.,  
                    Colson 130
- Sept 20            Richard Wright, *Native Son* (novel)  
                    Bryan Stevenson, “Crime, Punishment, and Executions in the Twenty-First Century,”  
                    *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 147 (March 2003). JSTOR

Sept 27 Willie Francis, "My Trip to the Chair" (pamphlet)  
Ernest Gaines, *A Lesson Before Dying* (novel)  
Deborah Denno, "When Willie Francis Died: The 'Disturbing' Story Behind One of the Eighth Amendment's Most Enduring Standards of Risk" (e-reserve)

Oct 4 Harper Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird* (novel)  
M. Watt Espy and John Ortiz Smykla. *Executions in the United States, 1608-1991: The ESPY File* [Computer file] 3rd ICPSR ed. Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research, 1994.  
<http://www.deathpenaltyinfo.org/documents/ESPYyear.pdf>

**Paper Proposals Due** – 3 paragraphs that explain your subject and indicate your argument/insight. Include at least 4 potential sources.

**Announcement: Lecture** October 7-- Aaron Sheehan-Dean, the Eberly Professor of Civil War Studies, noon, Colson 130

**Announcement: Reading** October 10 -- Sturm Writer-in-Residence (poet) Carol Frost, 7:30 p.m., Gold Ballroom, Mountainlair

Oct 11 Angela Davis, from *Abolition Democracy* (e-reserve)  
Alex Kozinski, "Tinkering with Death," *Debating the Death Penalty* (e-reserve)

**Writing Workshop—drafts due in class and to your writing partner by Sun**

*Recommended:* Albert Camus, "Reflections on the Guillotine," *Resistance, Rebellion, and Death*. Trans. Justin O'Brien. New York: Vintage, 1960. 175-234 (online)  
<http://www.deakinphilosophicalsociety.com/texts/camus/reflections.pdf>

**Announcement: Reading** October 14 -- Novelist and short story writer Valerie Nieman, noon, Colson 130

Oct 18 Jackie Ruzas, "Easy to Kill" (e-reserve)  
Robin Lee Row, "Open Letter" (e-reserve)  
Selections from Delbert Tibbs, "Death Law," "For Gary Graham"  
Judith Scheffler, "Imprisoned Mothers and Sisters: Dealing with Loss through Writing and Solidarity" in *Prose and Cons* (handout)  
**Guest: Professor Jim Nolan**

**First Essay Due**

- Oct 25 Caryl Chessman, *Cell 2455, Death Row: A Condemned Man's Own Story* (autobio)  
 Victor L. Streib, "Death Penalty for Lesbians." *National Journal of Sexual Orientation Law* 1.1 (1995): 105-126.  
 Farr, Kathryn Ann. "Defeminizing and Dehumanizing Female Murderers." *Women and Criminal Justice* 11.1 (May 2000): 49-66.
- Recommended: Theodore Hamm, Rebel and a Cause: Caryl Chessman and the Politics of Post-War California*
- Nov 1 Norman Mailer, *Executioner's Song* (novel)  
 Jennifer Roscher, "The Ambivalence of *The Executioner's Song*" in *Prose and Cons* (handout)
- Nov 8 Jill McDonough, *Habeas Corpus* (poetry)  
 Jessica Blank and Erik Jensen, *The Exonerated* (play)  
 George Ryan, "I Will Not Stand For It" (e-reserve)  
 David V. Baker, "American Indian Executions in Historical Context." *Criminal Justice Studies* 20.4 (2007): 315-373. (Mountainlynx electronic copy available)
- Proposals Due for Final Paper**
- Nov 15 Mumia Abu Jamal, *Live From Death Row* (essays)  
 Jarvis Jay Masters, from *Finding Freedom* (e-reserve)  
 Bruce Franklin, "Can the Penitentiary Teach the Academy to Read?" *PMLA* 123.3 (2008): 643-649. EBSCO
- Recommended: Megan Sweeney, Reading is My Window: Books and the Art of Reading in Women's Prisons.* Durham: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2010.
- Nov 22 Thanksgiving Break**
- Nov 29 View in Class: *The Execution of Wanda Jean Allen*  
**Drafts due in class and to your writing partner by Sun**
- Dec 6 **Writing Workshop**  
 Final Essays due date will be announced.

## Resident Expert Presentations:

- Aug 30 David Brion Davis, from *From Homicide to Slavery* (e-reserve)  
David Garland, from *The Peculiar Institution* (e-reserve)  
Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: the Birth of the Modern Prison*. 1975. Trans,  
Alan Sheridan. New York: Vintage, 1977. (handout)
- Sept 6 *Billy Budd* (novel)
- Sept 13 Langston Hughes, *Scottsboro, Limited* (play; handout)  
Sophie Treadwell, *Machinal* (play)
- Sept 20 Richard Wright, *Native Son* (novel)
- Sept 27 Willie Francis, "My Walk to the Chair" (pamphlet)  
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- Oct 4 Harper Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird* (novel)
- Oct 25 Caryl Chessman, *Cell 2455, Death Row: A Condemned Man's Own Story* (autobio)

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