

English 102W
Stories of Crime and Justice in the Americas:
Reading Against the Walls
W 5:30-8:00
Riverbend Maximum Security Prison

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Office Hours: By Appointment

"...to speak a true word is to transform the world." –Paulo Freire

"...there is no such thing as a trans-historical evil in the world in which we live; in fact, all violence without exception has causes, and the causes are historical." –Mamdani

Course Objectives: To create educational opportunities that unite those who are incarcerated with those from the outside community for critical dialogue, small group projects and reflection, focused and sustained critical thinking, and writing workshops. By the end of the class, students will be able to articulate strategies for reading against narratives designed to reproduce or legitimize structures and systems of oppression, approach writing as a means to de-naturalize and then substantively engage with the world, and write with confidence knowing that pre-writing and revision are essential parts of the writing process. Specifically, this class will:

- Develop effective writing skills including organization, punctuation, sentence and paragraph development;
- Develop effective writing processes (invention, revision, organization, proofreading, editing);
- Support students giving and receiving constructive feedback on peer texts;
- Help students sharpen argument with appropriate, relevant, and accurate evidence;
- Foreground and explore awareness of rhetorical moves;
- Sharpen critical thinking, problem-solving, and communication skills as a basis for life-long learning;
- Make visible the ways we are all already participating in the social, political, and economic spheres of both local and global communities and cultivate an awareness of this analysis as well as an awareness of how this analysis can open up new possibilities of participation;
- Increase knowledge and understanding of the world in which we live, how this world has come to be, and strategies and skills to make it otherwise.

Course Pedagogy: The pedagogy of this class is intentionally participatory and communal, inviting participants from the outside and inside to partner with each other and learn together. It adheres to the principle that education can be liberatory only when all claim knowledge as a “field in which we all labor” (bell hooks). Finally, it asks all students to enter into an agreement that creates a safe space, welcomes all voices, practices mutuality, and values each person.

Course Description: The course is designed to help students develop skills and confidence in writing effectively and in reading and analyzing the writing of others. We will focus on clear, compelling, and engaged prose; critical thinking and critical theory; how to document sources and speak to both academic and non-academic audiences; and how to write with attention to rhetorical context. Learning will be done through discussion, in class exercises and writing, homework assignments, peer review and writing workshops, and group projects.

This course will untangle the questions about voice, authority, permissibility, visibility, literacy, legibility, narrative, and power that are raised in [this short video from the BBC](#). We will read short stories, poetry, manifestoes, theory, prose, and memoir to explore the ways stories about crime and justice shape subjects and, in turn, how subjects shape stories of crime and justice. Recognizing these as sites of struggle, we will read *against* easy answers and read *for* a way to illuminate the complex navigations of form, authority, and power that happen when we read against the walls that confine us. As we practice critical reading, we will also reflect on the limitations and possibilities of writing to compose new stories of crime and justice. Asking whose stories are heard and how silence is read, we will focus on intersections of justice and power to begin to write back with attention to compelling and clear prose that engages critically with the discourse and logic of mass incarceration.

Composed of half insiders and half outsiders, we meet each week to practice close reading, generous critique, honest dialogue, and principles of democracy together. In this spirit of cooperation and collective action, students will create final projects that emerge from our thinking to present to a larger audience.

Course History: The key behind SALT (Nashville’s Prison Education project: Schools for Alternative Learning and Transformation) is the creation of a learning community that embodies mutuality and partnership. This class is modeled after classes taught by Harmon Wray, Richard Goode, and Janet Wolf in Nashville prisons. At its core, these courses understand education to be primarily a process of dialogue, participatory learning, and social transformation. This is the eighteenth semester in Riverbend.

Required Texts and Supplies

Alexander, Michelle. *The New Jim Crow*.

Cliff, Michelle. *No Telephone To Heaven*.

A Composition Notebook

Course Schedule

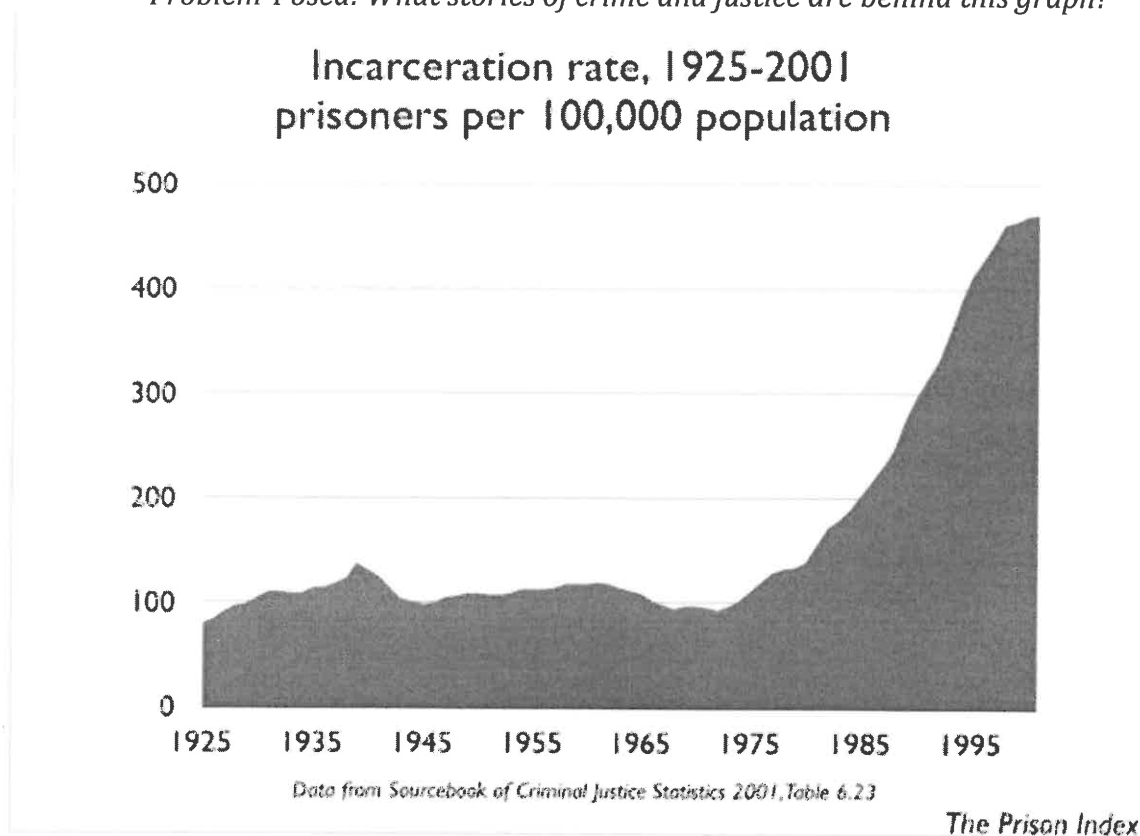
8.24 Orientation

8.31 “The New Jim Crow Packet”

9.7 Friere, P. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Chapter 1 **Paper #1 Due**

- 9.14 Zinn, Howard. *Voices*.
Poems from Guantanamo: The Detainees Speak
Olguin. "Writing Resistance" **Paper #2 Due**
- 9.21 Ganz, H. "Leading Change"
Schafer and Smith. "Life Sentences" **Paper #3 Due**
- 9.28 *Discourse on Colonialism* (50pp) **Paper #4 Due**
- 10.5 *No Telephone To Heaven* **REVISED PAPER DUE (From 1-4)**
- 10.12 *No Telephone To Heaven* **Paper #5 Due**
- 10.19 Writing Workshop **Paper #6 Due**
- 10.26 Wolf, Janet. "To See and Be Seen" **Paper #7 Due**
- 11.2 Douglass, "4th of July"
Assata, "To My People July 4, 1973"
Baldwin, "Letter to My Nephew" **Paper #8 Due**
- 11.9 Final Project Discussion
Mosley, Walter. "Equal Opportunity" **REVISED PAPER DUE (From 5-8)**
- 11.16 Projects
- 11.23 NO CLASS Thanksgiving
- 11.30 Projects
- 12.7 Final Projects Due
Graduation Celebration

Problem-Posed: What stories of crime and justice are behind this graph?



Source: Sourcebook of Criminal Justice Statistics, 2000, Table 6.23. (Peter Wagner, 2003)

102W Addendum

Grading

35%	Participation/In-Class Writing/Preparedness
35%	Reflection Papers **
30%	Final Group Project and Presentation

****Reflection Papers** Reflection papers are opportunities to think critically about readings, discussions, ideas raised during the week. This is not a book report or a summary or even a survey of what took place; it is an invitation for you to wrestle with an idea or issue and explore the relevance or the “so what” of that and what you might take from this week’s class and readings. 500-700 Words.

Grading Criteria

A=Excellent Work: Arrives on time for all classes, completes all assignments on time, is prepared for class, actively participates in class, demonstrates critical thinking, creativity, and openness to new ideas. Sometimes does more than the assigned work, bringing new resources or ideas. Demonstrates exceptional ability to apply concepts, and to creatively and appropriately organize and express ideas. Challenges are well substantiated and persuasively presented. Encourages participation by others and is effective in working with others in small groups.

B=Good Work: Arrives on time for all classes, completes assignments by due date, is prepared for class, actively participates in class, demonstrating critical thinking, creativity and openness to new ideas. Demonstrates solid ability to apply concepts with only minor problems; good organization and expression of ideas. Ideas or questions offered are usually substantive; provides good insights and sometimes direction for the class or group. Challenges are well substantiated and often persuasive. Encourages participation by others and is effective in working with other in small groups.

C=Average Work: Arrives on time for most classes, completes assignments mostly on time, is usually prepared for class and participates satisfactorily during class time. Demonstrates basic ability to apply concepts, moderate skill in organization and expression of ideas. Ideas or questions offered are sometimes substantive, provide generally useful insights but seldom offer a new direction for the discussion or effectively demonstrate critical thinking and creativity. Challenges are sometimes substantiated and persuasive. Contributes to work with others in small groups.

D=Marginal Work: Often late for class, missing several classes during the semester; often turns in assignments late and is not well prepared for class. Participates some but does not demonstrate effective critical thinking or creative engagement. Demonstrates some attempt at applying concepts, and some ability to organize and express ideas. Works with others in small groups.

F=Unacceptable Work: Often late for class and misses several classes during the semester; turns in few assignments that meet guidelines and is not well prepared for class. Often silent and disengaged during class time and does not work effectively with others in small groups. Demonstrates lack of command of the subject matter, unable to appropriately and consistently apply concepts; demonstrates an inability to organize and express ideas and an unwillingness to take work seriously.

Honor Code and Academic Conduct Plagiarism, cheating, fabrication, and misrepresentation are violations of both the honor code and expectations of academic conduct. Plagiarism is using other people’s words and ideas as if they were your own without giving credit. This includes failure to use quotation marks and list references as well as failure to cite sources in your work. If there is any sign of plagiarism, the assignment will not be graded, you will receive a zero, and will be in jeopardy of failing the class.

Course Policies created by SALT, American Baptist College, and Vanderbilt

SALT: Schools for Alternative Learning and Transformation is a think tank that meets at RMSI. The initial gathering in the spring of 2002 was started by Harmon Wray and now

includes graduate and undergraduate classes, lectures, seminars, and workshops. Current members are Rahim Buford, Richard Goode, Al Hughes, Jorge Sanjines, Ed McKeown, Nate Miller and Janet Wolf. SALT's mission is to unite those who are incarcerated with the outside community through education. SALT is a pedagogical experiment that takes seriously—and radicalizes—the teaching and learning context, the importance of social location, and the principle of diversity. Many of these classes have also served as a testing ground for a broader effort to develop an alternative vision for engaging with and participating in the criminal justice system.

ABC: “We are committed to equipping students to engage in public ministry through a liberating vision of love and justice, responding to the cry of the dispossessed, the claims of true justice and helping heal the wounds and divisions that disfigure the social body. We are committed to sustaining a ministry of love against all forms of oppression and hate based on race, class, gender, and sexual orientation.

VU: Vanderbilt University's undergraduate Inside-Out classes are committed to academic rigor and social-change pedagogy. Courses are designed to support students as they critically read intellectual and activist conversations and engage in these conversations to push the boundaries of both classroom and discipline. These courses begin with the idea that “education can only be liberatory when everyone claims knowledge as a field in which we all labor” and move to open up questions of the efficacy of education combined with action.

Nondiscrimination ABC and VU do not discriminate in any form against students, employees, or applicants on the basis of race, sex, sexual identity, national origin, religion, age, or disability. We comply with nondiscrimination laws Title VI, Title IX, Section 504, and the ADA. This policy and practice extends to cover all educational programs and activities.

Language We will attend to the power of language in class and in our writing by: using inclusive language (“people” not “man” unless we are speaking of males), avoid labeling, dehumanizing, abusive, or discriminatory language.

Students with Disabilities In compliance with Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act and the ADA, we will provide reasonable accommodation of all medically documented disabilities. If you would like the college to provide accommodations, please notify the professors as soon as possible.

Concluding Thoughts

From *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*: “I could for the first time pick up a book and understand what the book was saying. Anyone who has read a great deal can imagine the new world that opened. Let me tell you something: from then until I left that prison, in every free moment I had, if I was not reading in the library, I was reading on my bunk...I never had been so truly free in my life” (172-173). “...the ability to read awoke inside me some long dormant craving to be mentally alive. I certainly wasn't seeking any degree, the way a college confers a status symbol upon its students. My homemade education gave me, with every additional book that I read, a little bit more sensitivity to the deafness, dumbness, and blindness...” (179). “Sometimes I have dared to dream to myself that one day, history may even say that my voice—which disturbed the white man's smugness, and

his arrogance, and his complacency—that my voice helped to save America from a grave, possibly even a fatal catastrophe” (376).

“Look at what’s happening in this world. Every day there’s something exciting or disturbing to write about. With all that’s going on, how could I stop?” –Gwendolyn Brooks

“Education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity or it becomes the practice of freedom, the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world.” –Paulo Freire

“I honestly think in order to be a writer, you have to learn to be reverent...Let’s think of reverence as awe, as presence in and openness to the world. The alternative is that we stultify, we shut down. Think of those times when you’ve read prose or poetry that is presented in such a way that you have a fleeting sense of being startled by beauty or insight, by a glimpse into someone’s soul. All of a sudden everything seems to fit together or at least have some meaning for a moment.” –Anne Lamott, *Bird by Bird*

“The greatest obstacle is simply this: this conviction that we can’t change because we are dependent upon what is wrong.” –Wendell Berry

“Hurricane Katrina mirrors with terribly poignancy the state of a nation—a damning and bitterly accurate portrait of everyday life in America. Despite a chorus of claims to the contrary, Hurricane Katrina was not an equal opportunity disaster. Its asymmetrical impact on people’s lives vis-à-vis their relative place within the matrix of oppression cannot be denied. If your life was hard before the hurricane, it was exponentially harder after the storm—and remains so *up to this day*. For those who suffer daily the existing, pervasive, and insidious social inequities that are the US reality, Katrina was not an anomaly. It was simply business as usual...quoting Ida B. Wells from ‘Mob Rule in New Orleans’, 1900, ‘We do not believe that the American people who have encouraged such scenes by their indifference will read unmoved these accounts of brutality, injustice and oppression. We do not believe that the moral conscience of the nation—that which is highest and best among us—will always remain silent in the face of such outrages.’” *What Lies Beneath: Katrina, Race, and the State of the Nation* edited by South End Press Collective

“Focusing on the poor and ignoring the system of power, privilege, and profit which makes them poor, is a little like blaming the corpse for the murder.” –Michael Parenti

“Another world is not only possible, she is on her way. On a quiet day, I can hear her breathing.” –Arundhati Roy

“The good we secure for ourselves is precarious and uncertain until it is secured for all of us and incorporated into our common life.” –Jane Addams

“In the whole world, no poor devil is lynched, no wretch is tortured, in whom I too am not degraded and murdered.” –Aimé Césaire