

CMST 4162: Crime, Communication & Culture

Professor Bryan McCann, PhD
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“Prison continues, on those who are entrusted to it, a work begun elsewhere, which the whole of society pursues on each individual through innumerable mechanisms of discipline.”

Michel Foucault

Course Catalogue Description

Explores rhetorical dimensions of crime and incarceration in the United States; special attention to historical and contemporary expressions of race, class, gender, sexuality, national identity, etc. in and around criminal justice system.

Additional Description

According to a 2008 report by the Pew Center on the States, 2.3 million, or one in one hundred, American adults are in prison or jail. This means that the United States incarcerates a larger percentage of its population than any nation in the world. The report also warned that this explosive level of mass incarceration is unsustainable, arguing that it fails to prevent crime and causes a crippling drain on public resources. Indeed, a growing number of Americans of all political affiliations are coming to terms with the fact that the United States must reverse its heavy reliance on incarceration as a tool of crime prevention.

In Louisiana, one in 86 adults are behind bars. This is a higher per-capita incarceration rate than any other state. Thus, the Pelican State is the world’s prison capital.

America’s status as the world’s top jailer poses a number of salient questions. How did we get to this point? What strategies exist for reversing the tide of imprisonment? How does crime function as a site of political discourse? How do race, gender, sexuality, class, and other subject positions shape public discourses and policies regarding crime and punishment? In what ways do imprisonment and discourses of law and order impact the rhetorical agency of those it most directly impacts?

These are all questions uniquely suited for a communication perspective interested in the role of symbolic action in shaping public culture. Our goal in this course is to better grasp how crime, including our socially constructed definitions thereof, allows us to make sense of the world around us. In other words, we will engage the ways public discourses of crime and criminality function as sites of cultural production. Throughout the semester, we will engage a wide range of texts, including rhetorical, historical, philosophical, and sociological research on the criminal justice system and its role in public culture. We will also study primary sources from a variety of perspectives that highlight how crime and criminality impact different communities, and how

members of such communities have used communication to reckon with this salient dimension of American culture.

Course Objectives

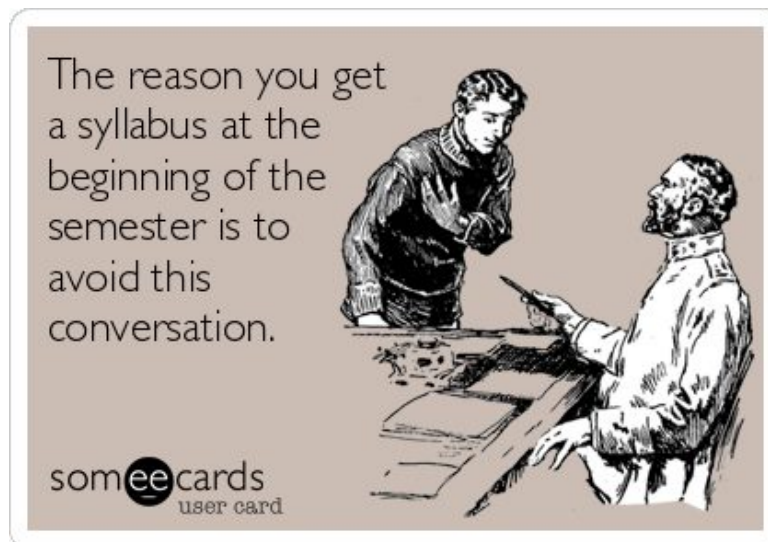
Students will develop a stronger appreciation for and critical understanding of communication's role in creating, sustaining, and challenging cultural norms. This will be accomplished by engaging the rhetorical dynamics of crime's place in public culture. Upon completion of this course, students will be able to:

- Understand the role of communication in shaping how Americans respond to crime
- Discuss the role of communication in sustaining and challenging mass incarceration
- Identify the relationships between criminal justice and aspects of social status and identity, including class, gender, race, and sexuality.
- Analyze primary texts that support and challenge dominant thinking on matters of crime
- Examine the ways the criminal justice system enables and constrains rhetorical agency
- Understand how the criminal justice system shapes American politics and notions of citizenship

Required Texts/Materials

- All readings/materials will be posted online.
- Access to and competency with online search engines and university libraries is essential for success in this course

COURSE POLICIES



Office Hours and Availability If, for whatever reason, my posted office hours do not work for you, please do not hesitate to contact me and arrange an alternative meeting time. Email is your best bet.

Please allow up to 24 hours for a response to emails. I do not generally respond to emails on weekends.

The Communication Environment The study of crime and public culture engages a wide range of philosophical, political, and ethical questions that often inspire strong, even visceral responses. I am committed to ensuring that our classroom is a hospitable environment where we can respectfully discuss and debate a wide range of relevant issues. Everyone should feel comfortable to speak their minds, but must do so in a way that enables others to do the same. You should also prepare to be held accountable for anything you say in class.

Participation and Attendance This class is discussion-oriented. Preparation for class and faithful attendance is directly correlated with success. In addition to missing vital information for successfully completing major assignments, you risk missing in-class assignments that will count toward your final grade.

If you plan to miss class or leave early for an unexcused reason (i.e. leaving for a family vacation, attending a job fair, studying for an exam in another class), please do not ask my permission. I will not prevent you from leaving, nor will I give you my blessing. We are all adults and, accordingly, are responsible for our own decisions. If you choose to prioritize something other than attending class during the scheduled time, that is your choice to make. You do not need my permission. However, you should also be mindful of the consequences for doing so.

I will, of course, excuse absences for university-sanctioned activities, religious observances, health reasons, personal emergencies, etc.

Readings This course will draw from a variety of materials, including book chapters, scholarly articles, graphic novels, memoirs, and literature authored by grassroots activists. Some readings will be straightforward, whereas others will be more difficult. Most will be suitable for polite company, but a few will make you blush or want to throw the material across the room. Virtually all of them will challenge you to reconsider your ideas about the nature of crime and punishment in America. In some cases, you will passionately disagree with an author's argument. At other times, you will wonder where this author has been all of your life.

Regardless of the day's readings, I expect you to arrive having completed all of them and prepared to engage in thoughtful, mature discussion. One does not need to agree with all, or even most of an author's work to learn from it.

If you are aware of readings, television clips, etc. that reflect the day's discussion, you should feel free to share them with the class (provided they are appropriate) via Moodle or during the designated class session.

Workload Students are expected, in addition to time spent in class, to spend a minimum of an additional 6 hours per week reading and thinking about material and putting forth effort toward the completion of course assignments. Thus, students are expected to devote at least 9 hours per week toward the successful completion of CMST 4162.

Late Work Written assignments are due at the start of class via email. Late work will automatically receive a 10% point deduction for each day it is late.

Academic Integrity I trust students in this class to do their own work. Students are responsible for adhering to the college's standards for academic conduct. Even revising another student's work, collaborating to share research with other students, or adapting your own work from another class is academic misconduct. Failure to acknowledge sources in written assignments or oral presentations constitutes plagiarism. If you are ever confused about how these policies apply to your own work, please play it safe and consult me.

I will officially report all instances of academic dishonesty to the Dean of Students. Consequences can range from zero credit on the assignment in question to dismissal from the university. For more information on this important issue, please look online at <https://grok.lsu.edu/Article.aspx?articleId=17072>

Drops/Withdrawals If you wish to drop this class, you must do so by 4:30pm on January 22. After this point, you will be issued a withdrawal grade. If you fail to withdraw by 4:30pm on April 4, you will receive an "F" for the semester.

Religious Observances It is LSU's policy to respect the faith and religious obligations of students, faculty and staff. Students with exams or classes that conflict with their religious observances should notify me well in advance (at least 2 weeks) so that we can work out a mutually agreeable alternative.

Special Needs Louisiana State University is committed to providing reasonable accommodations for all persons with disabilities. The syllabus is available in alternate formats upon request. Any student with a documented disability needing academic adjustments is requested to speak with Disability Services and the instructor, as early in the semester as possible. All discussions will remain confidential. This publication/material is available in alternative formats upon request. Please contact the Disability Services, 115 Johnston Hall, 225.578.5919.

E-mail All students must obtain and regularly check an email account. Expect periodic updates from me about what's happening in class via Moodle as well.

E-mail is also the best and quickest way to get in touch with me outside of class.

I will not, under any circumstances, communicate grade information via email or over the phone.

Moodle Please check Moodle for updates to the class schedule, assignment guidelines, grade information, readings, etc.

Commitment to Conversation I believe in the right and responsibility of students to take an active interest in their education. If there is anything inside or outside this class that you care to discuss with me, please do not hesitate to do so.

I understand that "life happens" and will work with you to make REASONABLE accommodations for issues that may be negatively impacting your performance in this class. The sooner you consult me on such matters, the better.

While I am happy to discuss grades on individual assignments throughout the semester (provided you do so no sooner than 24 hours after but within two weeks of receiving the grade), I do not respond well to having responsibility for your entire academic future thrust upon me. In other words, how your performance in this class will impact your GPA, ability to graduate, scholarship eligibility, etc. are not sufficient grounds for discussing a grade on an assignment. More generally, I will not entertain discussions about final grades once the semester is over. If you wish to challenge your final grade, you must do so through the proper university channels. Please visit this link for further information:

http://catalog.lsu.edu/content.php?catoid=1&navoid=27&hl=%22appeals%22&returnto=search#Grade_Appeals

Cell Phones, Laptops, etc. I am a technology junky and appreciate the important role smart phones, laptops, and the like play in our information society. That said, I also know they can function as a huge distraction in the classroom. If you have a cell phone, smart or otherwise, keep it in your pocket and on silent (vibrate is not silent). Failure to do so will result in my confiscating your phone for the duration of the class period. Please feel free to use your laptop to take notes and otherwise organize course material; however, if I notice you chatting on Facebook, visiting non-class related websites, etc., you must discontinue your use of the computer for the rest of the semester. In other words, technology is fine as long as it doesn't call attention to itself.

On exam days, any electronic devices must be turned off and securely in your bag. You will not receive a copy of the exam until your desk is void of any such devices and I will confiscate your exam if I see you making use of a cell phone, lap top, etc.

Contractual Agreement Your acceptance of these conditions, as well as the policies outlined in this document, is implied by your continuance in the class. To maintain the integrity of everyone's grade, and ultimately, degree, all course policies are non-negotiable.

Everything in this document, including the daily schedule, is subject to revision or modification due to unforeseen circumstances.

ASSIGNMENTS¹

Quizzes There will be six unannounced quizzes throughout the semester, four of which (i.e. the ones on which you score highest) will count toward your final grade. These will be based solely on the assigned readings for that week and will consist of multiple choice and/or short response questions. You may use any notes on the readings, but *may not* consult the readings at any point during the quiz. Quizzes begin promptly at the beginning of class and will last for fifteen minutes. If you arrive to class late, you still must hand in your quiz at the same time as everybody else. If you show up after a quiz has been given, you may not retake it.

Exams There will be two exams (including a non-cumulative final) during the semester. Exams will primarily consist of short essay prompts. Exams will cover material from readings *and* lectures.

Research Paper Option In lieu of an exam, you may opt to write a 10-12 page paper that analyzes a cultural text that challenges or supports the status quo of crime and public culture in the United

¹ Graduate students should meet with me separately to discuss expectations for the semester.

States. It might be a television series that reinforces stereotypes about the incarcerated, a musical artist who challenges the politics of crime and punishment, or a social movement that engages some element of law and order politics. Whatever you choose, it must be narrow enough to constitute its own unique text while also being broad enough to sustain an entire essay.

In addition to clearly describing your text, the paper should do all of the following:

- Be driven by a clear and well-supported thesis
- Situate the text within the broader history of crime and public culture in the United States
- Draw from readings inside (within the timeframe of the exam your essay is replacing) and outside of class to give your project a firm grounding in theory and method
- Use an appropriate citation method (e.g. MLA, APA, Chicago)
- Be free of spelling and grammatical errors

Each paper is due via email by class time on the day of the exam. ***If you choose to write a paper, you may not take the concurrent exam.***²

Prison Visit Essay On TBD, we will visit and tour the Louisiana State Penitentiary in Angola. This will serve as an excellent opportunity to see how an *actual* prison functions on a daily basis. You will also likely see evidence of the many discourses of crime and punishment that circulate in our society. Upon completing the visit, please prepare a 5-8 page essay. Imagine that your audience for this paper is a family member, friend, and/or fellow student who was not on the trip. In other words, as someone who has just had a very unique experience, what do you want others to know about it? As you write, use the following questions as guides:

What were your feelings before entering the prison? Were you nervous? Excited? How would you say your previous encounters with popular and political discourses on prison and crime shaped these feelings and expectations?

What were the first few minutes on the inside like? What sounds, smells, and sights specifically hit home with you?

To what extent did you see different members of the prison community enacting or violating different discourses of crime and punishment? These individuals should include administrators, staff (i.e. guards), and incarcerated individuals. In what ways did the overall culture/climate of the prison resonate with our class readings and discussions?

Do you believe you were seeing an accurate, or “authentic” portrayal of incarceration? To what extent do you believe the tour itself was rhetorical?

In retrospect, what are your thoughts on your own behavior during the trip? How did you respond to the prison museum? Did you take a picture inside the mock prison cell? Did you buy items from the gift shop? To what extent were you caught up in the spectacle of being at a “real prison”? How did you engage interpersonally with incarcerated individuals? Prison staff? How might your own experiences, or lack thereof, help you account for the ways you

² More detailed requirements for this and other written assignments will be posted on Moodle.

engaged with your surroundings? How might your exposure to public discourses on crime and punishment shape your behavior?

How did you feel after the visit? Did it challenge or change any of your assumptions about prisons in particular and the criminal justice system in general?

As with all written work in this class, your primary focus should be on the *rhetorical* dynamics of the experience. **Furthermore, while the above prompts are very personal in character, it will still be necessary to draw from and fully cite course materials.**

NOTE: This assignment is an alternative to the interview project (below). You may choose to complete whichever you please. *The prison trip, itself, is entirely optional.*

Interview Conduct an in-person or telephone interview with a person with a direct connection to the prison system. This person might be a formerly incarcerated individual, a family member of someone presently or previously behind bars, a crime victim, a prison guard, an activist, a criminal defense attorney, or a prosecutor. Whomever you choose, the person must have a convincing connection to the system we are spending the semester studying (i.e. someone who unceremoniously got a speeding ticket last fall won't cut it).³ In addition to turning in an audio recording of the interview (the person you interview may wish to assume a pseudonym and must verbally express their willingness to be recorded), you must submit a written summary of the interview that does the following:

- Summarizes the content of your discussion
- Provides biographical background on the person you are interviewing
- Reflects on how the language and content of their comments reflects a specific attitude about the prison system
- Speculates, based on their responses and outside scholarship, how different cultural discourses and experiences have shaped their relationship about the criminal justice system
- Describe how your conversation resonates with course material

Participation While I will spend some time lecturing on material, a significant amount of time will also be dedicated to discussion and activities. Therefore, participation is of the utmost importance for a successful semester. My understanding of participation includes taking part in class discussion, making use of office hours, coming to class prepared, attendance, etc. We will discuss what constitutes good participation more concretely in class.

Extra Credit Over the course of the semester, I will make you aware of extra credit opportunities. They will typically involve attending an event relevant to course material and possibly completing a related assignment.

You may also choose to participate in the Department of Communication Studies's research projects that need human participants. These include surveys, experiments (no electronic shocks, I promise), or pilot tests of future texts or videos. For more information, please visit <https://lsuhumanresearch.sona-systems.com/Default.aspx?ReturnUrl=/>

³ However, someone who received a speeding ticket and believed she/he was a victim of racial profiling or some other mistreatment at the hands of law enforcement will.

Each full study is worth 1 credit and you may participate for a maximum of 2 credits. Each credit is worth 2 points.

AVAILABLE POINTS

Assignment	Actual Points	Possible Points
Quiz 1		25
Quiz 2		25
Quiz 3		25
Quiz 4		25
Prison Visit Essay/Interview		50
Exam/Research Paper 1		100
Exam/Research Paper 2		100
Participation		30
Extra Credit		0
Total		380

REGARDLESS OF YOUR POINT TOTAL, YOU CANNOT PASS THIS CLASS IF:

- 1) You fail to complete the interview or prison reflection essay
- 2) You fail to take both exams or complete corresponding research papers
- 3) You fail to complete at least three quizzes

Grading Key

Outstanding achievement relative to requirements

368-380 = A+

354-367 = A

340-353 = A-

Above average relative to requirements

331-339 = B+

316-330 = B

302-315 = B-

Meeting basic course requirements

293-301 = C+

278-292 = C

264-277 = C-

Worthy of credit without meeting full requirements

255-263 = D+

240-254 = D

226-239 = D-

Failing to meet basic requirements

225 and below = F

PROJECTED SEMESTER SCHEDULE

	Dates	Topic	Readings	Due/Notes
Week 1	Jan 13	Course Introduction		
Week 2	Jan 19 & 21	Crime, Communication, and Culture	PCARE; Foucault	
Week 3	Jan 26 & 28	Social Foundations of Crime and Culture	Linebaugh; Thompson; Schiesl	
Week 4	Feb 2 & 4	Mediating the System	Gerbner & Gross; S. Hall et al.; Yousman	Class prison trip on Feb 2
Week 5	Feb 11	Violence and the State	Cover; Hartnett (I); Žižek	No class Feb 9 Prison trip reflection/interview essay due Friday by 4:00pm
Week 6	Feb 16 & 18	Victims	Picart; McCann (I); Faulkner & Smerconish	

Week 7	Feb 23 & 25	Crime and Belonging	Conquergood; Becker	
Week 8	Mar 1 & 3	Public Enemies	R. Hall	Exam 1 on Mar 1
Week 9	Mar 8 & 10	Outlaws, Badmen, and Celebrities	Hobsbawm; Schmid; McCulloch & Hendrix	
Week 10	Mar 15 & 17	Crime at the Intersections (I)	Alexander; Muhammad; Reeves & Campbell	
Week 11	Mar 22 & 24			SPRING BREAK
Week 12	Mar 29 & 31	Crime at the Intersections (II)	Jones; McCann (II); "Read Darren Wilson's;" Rankine	
Week 13	Apr 5	Crime at the Intersections (III)	Pearson; Sloop; Spade	No class Apr 7
Week 14	Apr 12 & 14	Education and Crime	Meiners; Rodríguez; Hartnett, Wood, & McCann	
Week 15	Apr 19 & 21	Imprisoned Intellectuals	James; Jackson; Abu-Jamal; Peltier	
Week 16	Apr 26 & 28	Strategies of Resistance	"Ferguson Speaks;" "Ferguson Action;" "Feeling the Edge;" Gingrich & Jones; Williams; Wallace- Wells	
Final Exam Week	May 6 10:00am- 12:00pm			Final exam

Readings

- Abu-Jamal, Mumia. *Live from Death Row*. New York: HarperCollins, 1996.
- Alexander, Michelle. *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. New York: The New Press, 2010.
- Becker, Sarah. "‘Because That’s What Justice Is to Us’: Exploring the Racialized Collateral Consequences of New Parochialism." *Critical Criminology* 22 (2014): 199-218.
- Conquergood, Dwight. "Homeboys and Hoods: Gang Communication and Cultural Space." In *Cultural Struggles: Performance, Ethnography, and Praxis*. Edited by E. Patrich Johnson, 224-63. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013.
- Cover, Robert. "Violence and the Word." In *Narrative, Violence, and the Law*. Edited by Martha Minow, Michael Ryan, and Austin Sarat, 203-38. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995.
- Faulkner, Maureen and Michael A. Smerconish. *Murdered by Mumia: A Life Sentence of Loss, Pain, and Injustice*. Guilford, CN: The Lyons Press, 2008.
- "Feeling the Edge of your Imagination: Finding Ways Not to Call the Police." *Imagine Alternatives*, 31 March 2010, <http://imaginealternatives.tumblr.com>
- "Ferguson Action: Our Vision for a New America." *FergusonAction.com*, November 2014, <http://cdn.fergusonaction.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/demands.pdf>
- "Ferguson Speaks: A Communique from Ferguson." *Vimeo*, 15 November 2014, <http://vimeo.com/111938224>
- Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Translated by Alan Sheridan. New York: Vantage Books, 1977.
- Gerbner, George and Larry Gross. "Living with Television: The Violence Profile." *Journal of Communication* 26 (1976): 172-94.
- Gingrich, Newt and Van Jones. "Prison System Failing America." *CNN*, 22 May 2014, <http://www.cnn.com/2014/05/21/opinion/gingrich-jones-prison-system-fails-america/>
- Hall, Rachel. *Wanted: The Outlaw in American Visual Culture*. Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2009.
- Hall, Stuart, Chas Critcher, Tony Jefferson, John Clarke, and Brian Roberts. *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order*. Hampshire, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 1978.
- Hartnett, Stephen John. *Executing Democracy: Volume One: Capital Punishment & the Making of America, 1683-1807*. East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2010.

- Hartnett, Stephen John, Jennifer K. Wood, and Bryan J. McCann. "Turning Silence into Speech and Action: Prison Activism and the Pedagogy of Empowered Citizenship." *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 8 (2011): 331-52.
- Hobsbawm, Eric. *Bandits*. New York: The New Press, 2000.
- Jackson, George. *Soledad Brother: The Prison Letters of George Jackson*. Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1994.
- James, Joy. *Imprisoned Intellectuals: America's Political Prisoners Write on Life, Liberation, and Rebellion*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003).
- Jones, D. Marvin. *Race, Sex, and Suspicion: The Myth of the Black Male*. Westport, CN: Praeger, 2005.
- Linebaugh, Peter. "Karl Marx, the Theft of Wood, and Working-Class Composition." In *Crime and Capitalism: Readings in Marxist Criminology*. Edited by David F. Greenberg, 100-21. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993.
- McCann, Bryan J. "On Whose Ground? Racialized Violence and the Prerogative of 'Self-Defense' in the Trayvon Martin Case." *Western Journal of Communication* 78 (2014): 480-99.
- McCann, Bryan J. "Therapeutic and Material <Victim>hood: Ideology and the Struggle for Meaning in the Illinois Death Penalty Controversy." *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 4 (2007): 382-401.
- McCulloch, Derek and Shepherd Hendrix. *Stagger Lee*. Berkeley, CA: Image Comics, 2006.
- Meiners, Erica R. *Right to Be Hostile: Schools, Prisons, and the Making of Public Enemies*. New York: Routledge, 2007.
- Muhammad, Khalil Gibran. *The Condemnation of Blackness: Race, Crime, and the Making of Modern Urban America*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010.
- PCARE. "Fighting the Prison-Industrial Complex: A Call to Communication and Cultural Studies Scholars to Change the World." *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 4 (2007): 402-20.
- Pearson, Kyra. "The Trouble with Aileen Wuornos, Feminism's 'First Serial Killer.'" *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 4 (2007): 256-75.
- Peltier, Leonard. *Prison Writings: My Life is My Sun Dance*. Edited by Harvey Arden. New York: St. Martins, 1999.
- Picart, Caroline Joan S. "Rhetorically Reconfiguring Victimhood and Agency: The Violence against Women Act's Civil Rights Clause." *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 6 (2003): 97-125.
- Rankine, Claudia. *Citizen: An American Lyric*. Minneapolis: Graywolf Press.

“Read Darren Wilson’s Full Grand Jury Testimony.” *The Washington Post*, 25 November 2014, <http://apps.washingtonpost.com/g/page/national/read-darren-wilsons-full-grand-jury-testimony/1472/>

Reeves, Jimmie L., and Richard Campbell. *Cracked Coverage: Television News, The Anti-Cocaine Crusade, and the Reagan Legacy*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994.

Rodríguez, Dylan. *Forced Passages: Imprisoned Radical Intellectuals and the U.S. Prison Regime*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006.

Schiesl, Martin J. “Behind the Badge: The Police and Social Discontent in Los Angeles since 1950.” In *20th Century Los Angeles: Power, Promotion, and Social Conflict*. Edited by Norman M. Klein and Martin J. Schiesl (153-94). Claremont, CA: Regina Books, 1989.

Schmid, David. *Natural Born Celebrities: Serial Killers in American Culture*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006.

Spade, Dean. “Their Laws Will Never Make Us Safer.” In *Against Equality: Prisons Will Not Protect You*. Edited by Ryan Conrad, 1-12. Chicago: AE Press, 2012.

Thompson, Heather Ann. “Why Mass Incarceration Matters: Rethinking Crisis, Decline, and Transformation in Postwar American History.” *The Journal of American History* 98 (2010): 703-34.

Wallace-Wells, Benjamin. “The Plot from Solitary.” *New York*, 26 February 2014, <http://nymag.com/news/features/solitary-secure-housing-units-2014-2/>

Williams, Stanley Tookie. *Blue Rage, Black Redemption: A Memoir*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004.

Yousman, Bill. “Inside *Oz*: Hyperviolence, Race and Class Nightmares, and the Engrossing Spectacle of Terror.” *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 6 (2009): 265-84.

Žižek, Slavoj. *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections*. New York: Picador, 2008.