

CMST 4107: Communication as Culture

“Crime & Public Culture”<sup>1</sup>

Professor Bryan McCann, PhD

Location: Coates 111

Time: MW 1:30pm-2:20pm

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Office hours: MW 9:00am-10:00am, or by appointment

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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

Creation, maintenance, and alteration of cultural norms, institutions, and values through both mass mediated spectacle and intimate communication ritual.

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, and thirteen times that of the global human rights pariah China. 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? What are the roles of race, gender, sexuality, and class in the American prison system? How has mass imprisonment functioned as a form of political discourse? In what ways does imprisonment 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

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<sup>1</sup> I’m very grateful to my colleague Stephen Hartnett for sharing his syllabi and ideas with me.

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 mass imprisonment impacts 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 society thinks about 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, race, gender, 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. I am also always close to email.

The Communication Environment The study of any aspect of culture engages a wide range of philosophical, political, and ethical questions that cut to the very core of what it means to be a citizen, even a human. 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 and practice-centered. 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.

Attendance on presentation days, even when you are not speaking, is required. Failure to attend all days will result in a ten-point deduction from your own presentation grade for each day missed.

Readings This course will draw from a variety of materials, including book chapters, scholarly articles, poetry, and literature authored by scholars of and stakeholders in the criminal justice system. 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 citizenship, politics, and democratic culture. In some cases, you will passionately disagree with an author's argument. At other times, you will wonder where she or he 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.

Late Work Written assignments are due at the start of class as we will often use them that day. Late work will automatically receive a 10% point deduction for each day it is late.

Incompletes Incompletes are reserved for extraordinary circumstances such as personal emergencies that can be documented. An incomplete is granted when, in my judgment, a student can successfully complete the work of the course without attending regular class sessions. Incompletes, which are not converted to a letter grade within one year, will automatically revert to an F (failing grade).

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.

If you do engage in academic dishonesty, you will automatically receive zero credit for the assignment in question, and risk failing the entire class and being subject to disciplinary action from the college and/or 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 24. After this point, you will be issued a withdrawal grade. If you fail to withdraw by 4:30pm on April 4, you will receive and "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, 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](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.

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.

## ASSIGNMENTS<sup>2</sup>

**Final Essay** This 10-15 page paper will analyze a cultural text that challenges or supports the status quo of crime and public culture in the United 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 and outside of class to give your project a firm grounding in theory and method

You must also arrive on the last day of class prepared to give a brief presentation.<sup>3</sup>

**Final Essay Outline** This should be a detailed outline for your final essay. While it need not perfectly reflect the final product (indeed, you will submit this outline for peer feedback), it should demonstrate a high degree of preparation on your part. A good outline will use full sentences, cite sources, and provide a reader with an accurate sense of what the final paper will look like.

**Final Essay Annotated Bibliography** Provide six annotations of sources not covered in class. Annotations are indispensable tools for familiarizing yourself with the available research and articulating its relationship to your unique project. An effective annotation includes a full citation of the source (using APA, MLA, or Chicago) and a paragraph (at least eight sentences) summarizing the contents on the source and its relationship to your essay.

**Topic Proposal** This 2-3 page essay should briefly describe the text you intend to analyze and make a case for its relevance. The essay should provide the following information:

What, in a nutshell, is this text or discourse?

What is its historical context? How does this context add to its overall importance?

What is the social relevance of this topic?

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<sup>2</sup> Graduate students should meet with me separately to discuss expectations for the semester.

<sup>3</sup> More detailed requirements for this and other written assignments will be posted on Moodle.

In what ways will your essay help enhance understanding of and/or pose new and provocative questions about rhetoric and the criminal justice system?

**Journal Essays** Much, if not all, of what we read in this class will challenge some long-held assumptions about the criminal justice system. Cultural representations of crime saturate our daily existence, although we rarely notice. It is impossible to read such work and remain neutral. Accordingly, on a rotating basis, you will share your reflections on the material and our classroom discussions. Each essay should be 1-2 pages. These may draw from personal experience, your observations of popular culture, a bone you have to pick with one of the authors, etc. All I ask is that the essays demonstrate your skills as a writer and are relevant to each unit. (NOTE: Do not mistake my flexibility for leniency regarding quality on these assignments. I expect nothing less than your best work). As time allows, we will discuss some entries during class. You may choose to rewrite ONE journal essay for a higher grade.

**Prison Visit Essay** I am presently attempting to organize a visit to a Louisiana prison or jail. This will serve as an excellent opportunity to see how *actual* jails and prisons function 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 that addresses the following:

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 different discourses of crime and punishment? These individuals should include administrators, staff (i.e. guards), and inmates. 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?

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 an inmate, 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 got a speeding ticket last fall won't cut it). In

addition to turning in an audio recording of the interview (the person you interview may wish to assume a pseudonym), 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

**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** At several points during the semester, I will notify you of opportunities for extra credit.

AVAILABLE POINTS  
(TENTATIVE)

Assignment	Actual Points	Possible Points
Journal Essay #1		10
Journal Essay #2		10
Interview/Prison Reflection		40
Topic Proposal		20
Annotated Bibliography		50
Outline		65
Final Paper		100
Participation		30
Extra Credit		0
<b>Total</b>		<b>325</b>

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

- 1) You fail to complete at least one journal essay

- 2) You fail to turn in your topic proposal
- 3) You fail to complete the interview or prison reflection essay
- 4) You fail to complete the final paper

Grading Key

*Outstanding achievement* relative to requirements

292-325 = A

*Above average* relative to requirements

259-291 = B

*Meeting* basic course requirements

227-258 = C

*Worthy of credit* without meeting full requirements

194-226 = D

*Failing* to meet basic requirements

193 and below = F

PROJECTED SEMESTER SCHEDULE

	<b>Dates</b>	<b>Topic</b>	<b>Readings</b>	<b>Due/Notes</b>
Week 1	Jan 15 & 17	Course Introduction	PCARE	
Week 2	Jan 22 & 24	Crime and Culture	Foucault (pp. 257-92)	No class Jan 20
Week 3	Jan 27, 29, & 31	Social Foundations of Crime and Culture	Linebaugh; Dubber; Thompson	
Week 4	Feb 3, 5, & 7	Mediating the System	Gerbner & Gross; Hall et al. (pp. 3-52); Yousman	Class prison trip Feb. 3
Week 5	Feb 14	Violence and the State	Cover; Hartnett (I) (pp. 1-41); Žižek (pp. 1-39)	No class Feb 10 & 12
Week 6	Feb 17, 19, & 21	Victims	Enck & McDaniel; McCann (I); Faulkner & Smerconish (pp. 1-16)	



Week 7	Feb 24, 26, & 28	Crime and Social Formations	Alonso; Becker	
Week 8	Mar 5 & 7	Public Enemies	Hall (pp. 1-23)	No class Mar 3
Week 9	Mar 10, 12, & 14	Outlaws, Badmen, and Celebrities	Hobsbawm (pp. 1-45); Schmid (pp. 1-27); McCulloch & Hendrix (pp. 7, 10-1, 25-7, 35-7, 46-7, 56-7, 104-5, 119-21, 185-9, 201-5, 217-21)	
Week 10	Mar 17, 19, & 21	Imprisoned Intellectuals	James (pp. 3-27); Jackson (pp. xiii-xxv), 32-3, 167-8, 104-5); Abu-Jamal (pp. 3-21); Peltier (pp. xiii-xxvi, 3-16)	
Week 11	Mar 24, 26, & 28	Race and Crime	Alexander (pp. 20-58); Muhammad (pp. 226-68); Jones (pp. 1-13)	
Week 12	Mar 31, Apr 2	Gender and Crime	Pearson; Picart; Wood	No class Apr 4
Week 13	Apr 7, 9, & 11	Education and Crime	Meiners (pp. 27-55); Rodríguez (pp. 75-112); Hartnett, Wood, & McCann	
Week 14	Apr 21, 23, & 25	Drugs and Culture	Larson; McCann (II); Reeves & Campbell (pp. 129-61)	Spring Break Apr 14-8
Week 15	Apr 28, 30, & May 2	Crime and Social Struggle	Hartnett (II); McCann (III); Williams (pp. xvii-xx, 359-78)	
Final Exam Week	May 9, 10:00am-12:00pm			Final paper presentations

## Readings

- Abu-Jamal, Mumia. *Live from Death Row*. New York: HarperCollins, 1996.
- Alonso, Alex A. "Racialized Identities and the Formation of Black Gangs in Los Angeles." *Urban Geography* 25 (2004): 658-74.
- Becker, Sarah. "'Because That's What Justice Is to Us': Exploring the Racialized Collateral Consequences of New Parochialism." *Critical Criminology*. Forthcoming. 10.1007/s10612-013-9211-6
- 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.
- Dubber, Markus Dirk. "Criminal Justice Process and War on Crime." In *The Blackwell Companion to Criminology*. Edited by Colin Sumner, 49-67. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.
- Enck, Suzanne Marie and Blake A. McDaniel. "Playing with Fire: Cycles of Domestic Violence in Eminem and Rihanna's 'Love the Way You Live.'" *Communication, Culture & Critique* 5 (2012): 618-44.
- Faulkner, Maureen and Michael A. Smerconish. *Murdered by Mumia: A Life Sentence of Loss, Pain, and Injustice*. Guilford, CN: The Lyons Press, 2008.
- 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.
- 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. "Lincoln and Douglas Meet the Abolitionist David Walker as Prisoners Debate Slavery: Empowering Education, Applied Communication, and Social Justice." *Journal of Applied Communication Research* 26 (1998): 232-53.
- 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.
- Larson, Daniel Mark. "Killing Democracy; or, How the Drug War Drives the Prison-Industrial Complex." In *Challenging the Prison Industrial Complex: Activism, Arts, and Educational Alternatives*. Edited by Stephen John Hartnett, 73-104. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2011.
- 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. "'A Fate Worse Than Death': Reform, Abolition, and Life without Parole in Anti-Death Penalty Discourse." *Working for Justice: A Handbook of Prison Education and Activism*. Edited by Stephen John Hartnett, Eleanor Novek, Jennifer K. Wood, 187-202. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013.
- McCann, Bryan J. "Genocide as Representative Anecdote: Crack Cocaine, the CIA, and the Nation of Islam in Gary Webb's 'Dark Alliance.'" *Western Journal of Communication* 74 (2010): 396-416.
- 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.
- 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.
- Schmid, David. *Natural Born Celebrities: Serial Killers in American Culture*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006.
- Thompson, Heather Ann. "Why Mass Incarceration Matter: Rethinking Crisis, Decline, and Transformation in Postwar American History." *The Journal of American History* 98 (2010): 703-34.
- Williams, Stanley Tookie. *Blue Rage, Black Redemption: A Memoir*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004.
- Wood, Jennifer Kay. "In Whose Name? Crime Victim Policy and the Punishing Power of Protection." *NWSA Journal* 17 (2005): 1-17.
- 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.

