



UC Santa Cruz
Kresge 60C – 01- Prison Narratives
“The Highest Form of Knowledge is Empathy”

Instructor:

Megan McDrew – mmcdrew@ucsc.edu

Office Hours:

By appointment via zoom

Meeting Time and Location:

ONLINE – ASYNCHRONISTIC

“Prison literature is a fascinating glimmer of humanity persisting in circumstances that conspire, with overwhelming force, to obliterate it. Incarcerated memoirs disclose the nasty, brutish details of the life within – a life the authorities would rather we not know about, a life so far from conventional existence that the accounts of those who experience it exert the fascination of the unknown, sometimes the unbelievable. What happens inside the walls inevitably reflects the society outside” Tom Wicker

“In the decade of the 1960’s both San Quentin’s inmates and its treatment staff would lose what little faith remained in the notion of rehabilitation, as many convict writers moved from arguing...that they should be released or their sentences be commuted because they had been rehabilitated, to the angry assertion that they did not need to be rehabilitated because they were not ‘bad’ or ‘sick.’ It was the justice system, they argued, and American society, that needed rehabilitation; prisoners were its victims...” Eric Cummins

“Prisons do not disappear social problems, they disappear human beings. Homelessness, unemployment, drug addiction, mental illness, and illiteracy are only a few of the problems that disappear from public view when the human beings contending with them are relegated to cages.” Angela Davis

UCSC Course description:

This course examines 20th-21st century U.S. prison narratives through the lens of justice theories; this critical approach decenters the dominant discourse and posits that incarcerated lives matter. By putting prisoner voices and prisoner experiences at the center of the discourse on prisons and “crime and punishment,” we can interact with and develop relationships with the imprisoned. This seminar explores these narratives as crucial sites of knowledge production about the prison industrial complex (PIC). Central questions are: how does incarceration inform conceptions of democracy? How does the PIC shape concepts of freedom/enslavement, citizenship/social death, retributive / reconciliatory justice? Studying prison narratives also gives us the opportunity to reflect on the meanings of freedom and to imagine abolition democracy as ideologies and practices that prefigure a world without prisons.

Instructor Course Description:

The purpose of this course is to introduce you to books and essays written by those who were formerly incarcerated or who are currently incarcerated. For the last 6 years, I have been teaching in two prisons – one a medium security prison called Correctional Training Facility (CTF) in Soledad, CA and the other is a maximum security prison on the same property as CTF called Salinas Valley State Prison. Through instructing sociology courses in these prisons and building networks with incarcerated authors and activists around the state, I have been able to compile a range of literary pieces from my currently incarcerated students that I will selectively share with you in this course. Each week, you will be reading a published book (or selections from the assigned book) as well as 5-7 currently incarcerated narratives based on the designated weekly theme. The idea is to give you not only a broad, academic perspective on incarceration but also a deeply personal, vulnerable and intimate look at the lives of those who are captive in this system of punishment and control. I hope you begin to see between the bars so to speak as we explore the history of incarceration, the law and order discourse vs. the reformist and the abolitionist discourse, the narratives around female incarceration, and those involving political prisoners, men sentenced to life without parole and those enduring death row and/or solitary confinement. You will read from incarcerated authors who have committed extremely violent and harmful acts who also share their life histories and pivotal events that contributed to their crime/s. My hope is you are able to put the pieces together to see a much more complex and entangled tapestry of hurt and trauma than is often, if ever, shared, discussed or given much credence to in mainstream discourse.

My goal within this course is for you to leave with more questions than answers...to become curious, engaged and maybe even enraged about the state of incarceration in the United States. Reading and analyzing writing by those caged inside is a revolutionary and rebellious act – one that I hope leaves you with a new way of thinking and a desire for prison abolition through imaginative action.

Optional Meeting Times:

While this course is asynchronous when it comes to the class lectures, we do have the opportunity to connect weekly visits to CTF Soledad prison as well as guest speakers that I plan to arrange via zoom.

Beginning on June 30th from 4pm-6pm, we will go inside CTF Soledad to read 'Are Prisons Obsolete?' with about 20-30 incarcerated men, or as I call them, our Brothers in Blue. We will be going in on June 30th, July 7th, July 14th and July 21st, all from 4pm-6pm. If you would like to attend these visits, the requirement is that you commit to all sessions. I will need you at the entrance to the prison by 3:40 at the latest on the designated dates. More will be sent via Canvas on this.

In addition, during Weeks 2-4, I have arranged for either a guest speaker to present to the class or a recording of the speaker that you will have access to listen to. While these meetings are optional, you are strongly encouraged to attend as you will not find or have another experience like this to learn and hear from formerly and currently incarcerated authors and activists.

During Week 5, we will conclude class with student presentations via zoom. This class is synchronous and you are required to attend. Please save the date and time for Friday, June 22nd from 11am-1pm for this final class session where you will be presenting your final project.

Course Readings:

There is one required text for this course. The Davis book can be found online or free as a pdf I believe as well as inside the UCSC bookstore.

- Davis, Angela – Are Prisons Obsolete?
-

We will also be reading selections from the following books that I will provide via Canvas:

- Gray, Ted, Richard Mireles, Jason Bryant & Matthew Brayden – Men Built for Others.
- Abu-Jamal, Mumia – Live From Death Row
- Kilgore, Ivan – Domestic Genocide
- Stevenson, Bryan – Just Mercy
- Woodfox, Albert – Solitary
- Davis, Angela – Abolition Democracy

Lastly, I will be including 5-7 essays from currently (or formerly) incarcerated students on your Canvas page each week that cover topics ranging from prisons as sacrifice zones to autobiographies onto rehabilitation and restorative justice in prison.

Course Requirements

- Students must read all of the required texts.
- Students must be engaged with the course through attending the guest presentations and responding to discussion posts.
- Students must submit a final paper and a reading journal. There is no final exam.

Course Goals

- Students will learn to analyze the conventions of prisoner writings.
- Students will develop a knowledge of the history of the prison and the emergence and characteristics of the prison-industrial complex.
- Students will understand the differences between prison reform and prison abolition.
- Students will learn to situate prisoner writings within the context of historical and theoretical texts.
- Students will be introduced to and will practice social dreaming within the context of prefigurative politics.

Assignments – FYI - more specific requirements and details will be provided on Canvas when the course begins:

- **Weekly Reflection Essay – “Connecting the Dots”** - at the end of each week you will be submitting a reflection piece based on what you are assigned to read for the week. I will be asking you to apply what you are reading in the published texts to the unpublished, socio-autobiographies that I share with you written by incarcerated men in California prisons. At the beginning of each week, I will the assignment with specific guidance as far as what to look for

thematically in the readings as you dig into the material. You will then have about 5-6 days to read the material and write the reflection.

An important purpose of writing these essays is for you (1) to explore topics that interest you, but an equally important purpose of writing the journal is (2) to show evidence that you are grappling with the central topics discussed by the prisoner writers. Additionally, (3) the journal should carry forward the conversations we have in class – raise questions, dispute, ask for clarifications, make suggestions. These reflection essays give you the opportunity (4) to analyze on your own experience and, finally, (5) to weigh differing points of view. You are not asked in the Reading Reflection Essays to show mastery of a body of knowledge as in an examination; nor are you asked to produce knowledge based on research. Nor do the essays need to be thesis-based. Instead, this assignment gives you the opportunity to produce knowledge by connecting the reading to your life and by having a conversation with the writer. Each reflection essay is worth 30 points.

- **Final Project Essay – “Abolitionist Dreaming”** - This course invokes the critical imagination and invites us to question what we take for granted. Imagining and dreaming produce important knowledges about what we need and want, about possibilities, about ways to resist oppression and suffering and about ways to build better lives.

Abolitionist dreaming helps us to resist those voices who insist that we have to settle for the way things are, the world as it is; the abolitionist imagination helps us see beyond what is in front of us: the prison industrial complex, the military industrial complex, the perpetual wars of the 21st century, the abyss of multiple inequalities and systems of oppression.

The purpose of abolitionism is not only to make the physical use of the cage for human beings impossible, but to make the logic of the cage unthinkable. According to Critical Resistance, the “Prison industrial complex (PIC) is a term we use to describe the overlapping interests of government and industry that use surveillance, policing, and imprisonment as solutions to economic, social and political problems. Through its reach and impact, the PIC helps and maintains the authority of people who get their power through racial, economic and similar privileges. There are many ways this power is collected and maintained through the PIC, including creating mass media images that keep alive stereotypes of people of color, poor people, queer people, immigrants, youth, etc. as criminal, delinquent or deviant. This power is also maintained by earning huge profits for private companies that deal with prisons and police forces; helping earn political gains for 'tough on crime' politicians; increasing the influence of prison guard and police unions; and eliminating social and political dissent by people of color, poor people, immigrants, and others who make demands of self-determination and reorganization of power in the US. All these things are parts of the PIC.” <http://criticalresistance.org/resources/abolitionist-tools/>

To dream of a world without the PIC, a world without state violence, a world where everyone has food, clothing, shelter, quality education and health care, a world free of systems of oppression (like white supremacy, patriarchy, capitalism, homo- and trans phobia, misogyny and master-slave relationships) means, to me, creating relationships that interrupt state and personal violence, creating relationships and institutions that are life-

giving rather than death-making. It means replacing dehumanization with the refusal to dehumanize; it means replacing violence with love, replacing vengeance with reparation; it means replacing humiliation with dignity.

With all that said, your final assignment will be as follows -

Reimagining Punishment – Prisons as....

Throughout the course, you have been reading about the lives of the incarcerated, pre, during and post imprisonment. You have read essays on how prisons are failing at rehabilitation and sacrificing the millions of lives inside for profit. You have read enough prison narratives to see the humanity, the resilience, the profoundly reflective spirits that endure captivity. My goal, as stated earlier, is that you begin to see the ineffectiveness and cruelty of jails, prisons and detention centers. I will give more details on Canvas but for your final project, I'd like you to invoke the abolitionist imagination and explore the possibility of creating a society without the practice of chaining.

The second part of the assignment will draw from Starhawk, in "Fierce Love," where she argues that we need to (and can) "reshape the world in the image of freedom...." by "resisting the weapons the culture has devised against the self." If you accept the terms of her characterization, examine your own life and name and discuss one way in which you can be more free AND discuss one way you can help someone else to be more free in the world. If you do not accept the terms of her argument, explain why.

Grading

Class participation and attendance: 20% (seen via discussion posts and assignments)

Reading Reflection Journals (x4): 40%

Final Paper: 40%

Academic Honesty:

You are expected to follow the University guidelines for academic honesty. Violations include cheating and plagiarism, as well as self-plagiarism (submitting your own work from a different assignment). Attribution and proper citations are expected for all ideas that are not your own. If you have any doubts, please speak to me before the assignment is due. For more information on penalties for plagiarism, see The Navigator (<http://reg.ucsc.edu/navigator/>) and the UCSC Student Policies and Regulations Handbook (<http://www2.ucsc.edu/judicial/handbook.shtml>).

Special Needs and Accommodations:

UC Santa Cruz is committed to creating an academic environment that supports its diverse student body. If you are a student with a disability who requires accommodations to achieve equal access in this course, please submit your "Accommodation Authorization Letter" from the Disability Resource Center (DRC) to me via email, as early as possible in the academic quarter, preferably within 1 week. I also am open to and want to encourage you to discuss with me ways I/we can ensure your full participation in this course. If you have not already done so, I encourage you to learn more about the many services offered by the DRC. You can visit their website (<http://drc.ucsc.edu/index.html>), make an appointment,

and meet in-person with a DRC staff member. The phone number is 831-459-2089 or email drc@ucsc.edu.

Safety, Inclusion and Classroom Conduct:

The Sociology Department affirms in the clearest and strongest terms that Sociology @ UCSC is committed to promoting and protecting an environment that values and supports every person in an atmosphere of civility, honesty, cooperation, professionalism and fairness. We are committed to the principles of cultivating an open, diverse, purposeful, caring, and just community. Sociology @ UCSC fosters safe and equitable learning environments and aims to support its community in its entirety. If the department can create a more inclusive, equitable, and just atmosphere, please let us know by completing this online form:

https://docs.google.com/a/ucsc.edu/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLScPLrMP5mLOzqYLFejOJL_M_PlwqF5hxsRFpkTdN99jORBKeQ/viewform.

Students [as well as faculty, teaching assistants and staff] are expected to be civil and to treat each other with dignity and respect. Basic courtesy is essential to a collaborative, learning environment. Differing opinions are part of free exchange as long as they remain respectful. As such, harassment, discrimination, and disrespectful behavior will not be tolerated. If you witness or have been a target of a hate or bias motivated incident on campus or while participating in a University sponsored activity, please report the incident to the campus Hate/Bias Response Team at:

<https://reporthe.ucsc.edu/how-to-report/index.html>. Both reporting forms are linked to every page of the department website at: <https://sociology.ucsc.edu/index.html>.

Sexual Violence and Sexual Harassment:

Please be aware that under the UC Policy on Sexual Violence and Sexual Harassment, faculty and student employees (including Teaching Assistants, Readers, Tutors, etc.) are “responsible employees” and are required to notify the Title IX Officer of any reports of incidents of sexual harassment and sexual violence (sexual assault, domestic and dating violence, stalking, etc.) involving students. Academic freedom exceptions exist for disclosures made within a class discussion or assignment related to course content; under those conditions only, a report to the Title IX Officer is not required. The Campus Advocacy Resources and Education (CARE) Office (831) 502-2273, care@ucsc.edu can provide confidential support, resources, and assist with academic accommodations. Report a possible Title IX incident, by calling (831) 459-2462 or fill out this online form at: https://ucsc-gme-advocate.symplcity.com/public_report/index.php/pid966750.

Lecture/Discussion Topics + Scheduled Readings & Assignments:

Week 1 - Theme: History of Imprisonment + Prison Narratives

June 20th: Introduction to the course, syllabus, readings, Canvas page, instructor/student introductions. Optional zoom introduction with me on June 20th- time TBA.

Readings: Angela Davis - *Are Prisons Obsolete* Chapters 1 and 2; Kilgore – *Domestic Genocide* – Chapter 8; Michelle Alexander, *America’s New Jim Crow System* – The Guardian; *Men Built for Others* – Forward, Letter, Preface and Introduction. Prisons As Sacrifice Zones Essays

Due: Weekly Reflection Journal Assignment

Week 2 – Theme: Female Imprisonment + Narratives

June 26th: Readings: Bryan Stevenson – *Just Mercy* ‘selections’

Anastazia Schmidt - [https://wfhb.org/news/kite-line-february-2-2018-the-past-isnt-passed-cycles-of-violence-and-exploitation/\(0-12:55\)](https://wfhb.org/news/kite-line-february-2-2018-the-past-isnt-passed-cycles-of-violence-and-exploitation/(0-12:55)); <https://abolitionjournal.org/crafting-the-perfect-woman-how-gynecology-obstetrics-and-american-prisons-operate-to-construct-and-control-women/>

Sharon Daniels – [The Public Secrets](#)

Starhawk – [Fierce Love](#)

Marilyn Buck – [Cruel But Not Unusual](#)

Due: Weekly Reflection Journal Assignment

Guest Speaker: [Anastazia Schmidt](#) (pre-recorded)

CTF Soledad Prison Visit – June 30th 4pm-6pm

Week 3 - Theme: Contemporary Narratives + Prison Reform vs. Prison Abolition

July 4th: Readings: Keri Blakinger and Keegan Hamilton. “[I Begged Them To Let Me Die’: How Federal Prisons Became Coronavirus Death Traps.](#)” In *The Marshall Project*, 18 June 2020.

Abbie Vansickle. “[How To Hide a COVID-19 Hotspot? Pretend Prisoners Don’t Exist.](#)” In *The Marshall Project*, 27 May 2020.

Angela Davis – *Are Prisons Obsolete* Chapters 3 and 4; Angela Davis – [The Challenge of Prison Abolition – A Conversation](#); Ruth Wilson Gilmore – [Is Prison Necessary?](#)

Incarcerated Autobiographies

Due: Weekly Reflection Journal Assignment

Guest Speaker: [Lawrence Bartley](#) (pre-recorded)

CTF Soledad Prison Visit – July 7th 4pm-6pm

Week 4 - Theme: Incarcerated Autobiographies; Life Without Parole; Death Row Narratives

July 11th: Readings: Mumia Abu Jamal – *Live From Death Row* ‘selection’; Albert Woodfox – [Solitary](#) ‘selection’; Solitary documentary (HBO – extra credit); Incarcerated Autobiographies

Due: Weekly Reflection Journal Assignment

Guest Speaker: [TBA](#)

CTF Soledad Prison Visit – July 14th 4pm-6pm

Week 5 – Theme: Future of Incarceration + Create Your Own Prison Narrative

July 18th: Readings: Angela Davis – *Are Prisons Obsolete* Chapters 5 and 6; Angela Davis – *Abolition Democracy* (selections); Ivan Kilgore – *Domestic Genocide* (selections); Ursula LeGuin - [Walking Away from Omelas](#); John Braithwaite – [Restorative Justice and a Better Future](#); *Men Built for Others* - Chapters 3, 4, and 7; Incarcerated essays – Rhetoric of Rehabilitation

Due: Final Project: Transforming Prisons: Prisons as....

*Invoke the abolitionist imagination and explore the possibility of creating a society without the practice of caging. You can refer to this website for more ideas and resources!

<http://criticalresistance.org/resources/abolitionist-tools/>

Worth 50 points.

July 22nd 11am-1pm: Final Project Presentations: In this final “live” class session, you will have the chance to present your ideas for prison transformation/abolition with a 5 minute visual presentation. Worth 10 points extra credit.

CTF Soledad Prison Visit – July 21st 4pm-6pm