

English 360
(Life/Sentences)
Fall Semester 2011 [Course Completed Using this Syllabus]
W 1-4 PM
Upstate Correctional Facility
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I. The Course

A February 2008 *New York Times* story reported that 1 in every 99.1 U.S. adults was behind bars, 1.6 million in prison (up by 25000 from 2007) and another 723,000 in local jails—the highest rate of incarceration for any nation in modern history. Another significant portion of the U.S. population works inside these jails and prisons, which are major employers in depressed regions-- Ted Conover, in his book *New Jack: Guarding Sing-Sing*, called the prison-industrial complex northern New York state's "growth industry."

Still, despite the scope of the issue, most of us know very little about prison life. Prison walls are meant to keep inmates in, of course, but teacher/activist Simone Weil Davis they also hold the rest of us out. Prisons dot our local landscape like blind spots, says Davis, so that our internalized maps of home are "skewed, pitted with lacunae." And these blind spots impoverish us and impede social change.

Students in "Life/Sentences" will interrogate this cultural ignorance, experiencing prison life firsthand at the Upstate Correctional Facility (see Appendix A for more information), a maximum security state prison 50 miles from campus, and via first-person narratives about prison life. They will discuss issues surrounding contemporary prisons with incarcerated classmates in a setting modeled on the Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program, begun at Temple University.

II. Texts

- A. John Edgar Wideman, *Brothers and Keepers*
- B. Beverly Lowry, *Crossed Over*
- C. Various Handouts

II. Graded Work

- A. Class Participation, 10%
- B. Reflective Essays, 3 x 20% each (details TBA)

- C. Group Outreach Project, 30 %

III. Policies

- A. Attend class.
- B. Complete reading assignments before class (I reserve the right to administer reading quizzes to ensure student preparedness).
- C. Turn papers in on time.
- E. Be respectful of classmates, staff and faculty.

IV. Course Calendar

- 8/24** *Student Orientation*: Lisa Stickney visits SLU class; film
- 8/31** *Breaking the Ice*: Initial combined meeting; tour of Upstate Correctional Facility; fingerprinting, carding, etc.
- 9/7** *Debriefing*: Discuss Prison Visit and PDF Material (Conover Excerpt from *New Jack*, Eric Schlosser *Atlantic* Piece on the Prison/Industrial Complex); **Reflection 1 Due**
- 9/14** *What Are Prisons For?*
Discuss Baldwin, "Sonny's Blues," "An Open Letter to Sister Angela Y. Davis," and "Letter to My Imprisoned Brothers" (Handouts)
- 9/21** *Why Do People Commit Crimes?*
Discuss Wideman, *Brothers and Keepers*, Preface, Intro, and 1-80
- 9/28** *Analyzing the Criminal Justice System*
Discuss Wideman, *Brothers and Keepers*, 81-166
- 10/5** *Myths and Realities of Prison Life*
Discuss Wideman, *Brothers and Keepers*, 167-end; **Reflection 2 Due**
- 10/12** **NO CLASS (FALL BREAK)**
- 10/19** *Punishment and Rehabilitation*: Discuss Lowry, *Crossed Over*, Foreword and 1-79
- 10/26** *Restorative Justice*: Discuss Lowry, *Crossed Over*, 80-160
- 11/2** Discuss Lowry, *Crossed Over*, 161-end; **Reflection 3 Due**
- 11/9** Outreach Project Introduction and Planning
- 11/16** Outreach Project Planning Continued
- 11/23** Outreach Project Presentations
- 11/30** Closing Ceremonies
- 12/7** Final Debriefing (separate meetings)

Appendix A: Information About Upstate Correctional Facility

Upstate Correctional Facility, a maximum security prison for men located in Malone, New York, was constructed in 1999 to house inmates sentenced to disciplinary segregation or Special Housing Units (SHUs) for violating prison rules. Inmates in disciplinary segregation are most commonly sentenced to Upstate for misbehavior reports relating to drug use or possession. Its modern structure consists of cells designed to limit contact between inmates and staff, with solid steel doors, recreation pens attached to the back of each cell that can be opened remotely by staff, as well as remotely operated showers. The cells, which measure 105 square feet, are designed to house two inmates who share a small table, a shower and a toilet, although some inmates are housed alone.

Approximately 300 Upstate inmates, including the 8 enrolled in the Inside-Out course, are members of the prison's Cadre of workers, responsible for tasks including maintenance, cleaning and food preparation. Cadre inmates agree to work longer hours and have fewer programs available to them than they would at traditional maximum or medium security prisons in exchange for transfers to an area of the state of their choice after working two years at the prison. Cadre inmates all have a cellmate, and their cells are on a block that is separate from the SHU inmates. Contact between Cadre and SHU inmates is limited to haircuts or encounters in areas like the infirmary or corridors. The facility has begun to provide additional programs to Cadre inmates since our 2004 visit. Educational offerings now include Adult Basic Education, English as a Second Language, Pre-General Equivalency Degree (GED) and GED. A total of 50 students participate in educational classes, and 96 are on waiting lists. In addition, the facility now offers Alcohol and Substance Abuse Treatment to the Cadre, which has an enrollment of 38 students and 103 on the waiting list. Six inmates also participate in Alcoholics Anonymous.

