

Prof. Justin Mann
Office: University Hall 326
Office Hours:
Email: justin.mann@northwestern.edu

Writing Mass Incarceration

In this first-year seminar, we will engage the period scholars call Mass Incarceration, by examining how authors and critics use writing to describe, explain, critique, and ultimately reimagine justice in the United States and beyond. Drawing on traditions of critical race theory, black feminist theory, and models of abolitionist and restorative justice, we will examine black memoir and fiction that centers the issue of mass incarceration to understand its history, development, and future. Centering the practice of writing, we will develop our own writing style and prose as we consider why and how writing about mass incarceration has been central to movements seeking to end what scholars term the prison-industrial complex. Importantly, while we will think about and with the genre of prison writing, we will also consider mass incarceration as a movement that transcends the institutional walls of the prison by critically interrogating the school-to-prison-to-deportation pipeline and other such formations that emanate from the system of mass incarceration. We will also examine mass incarceration as a technique of colonial and anti-immigrant policing in the age of the War on Drugs and the War on Terror.

This class will be a skills-intensive writing workshop. Your reading load will be lighter to allow for weekly writing and revising. This class will also include the collaborative process of working in a writing group.

Learning Objectives

By the end of this course, students will be able

- To define and explain elements of the systems of mass incarceration and the prison industrial complex
- To analyze elements of rhetorical and argumentative strategies
- To craft cogent arguments about contemporary carceral systems

In addition, students in this course will develop strategies for managing time, critical reading, and analytic writing that will benefit them in all of their academic endeavors.

Required Texts

James Baldwin, *If Beale Street Could Talk*
Jesmyn Ward, *Men We Reaped: A Memoir*
Colson Whitehead, *The Nickel Boys*

Grading

Participation	15
Classwork	15
Free Writing Journal	15
Essay 1	15
Essay 2	20
Peer Review	20

Class Policies/Code of Conduct

Climate – This course does not harbor belligerent or intolerance speech or behavior toward anyone on the basis of race, gender identity, sexuality, immigration status, or ability. This is true of synchronous discussions, written work, and discussions about this class that extend beyond the classroom.

As Koritha Mitchell writes, “The N-word won’t be used in this class by a person of any race, even if it consistently appears in our texts. The same goes for the “F” word, regardless of a person’s (perceived) sexual orientation or gender expression. And, this is simply not a space in which we call people ‘trash.’”¹¹ For more about this, please listen to Prof. Mitchell’s podcast at <http://bit.ly/2TAkuU5> or read from her blog, cited below.

The relationship between blackness and policing is directly germane to our course of study. As we will chart in our readings, Black letters have been directly responsive to the social, juridical, and cultural production of Black criminality. We therefore take as axiomatic the concept that black lives matter and use that premise as a position through which to read and understand the relationship between literature and society. We will also read texts from across the 20th century that position police violence, brutality, and murder as a chief force of anti-Blackness and that seek to dismantle racialized policing.

Land Acknowledgement – The Northwestern campus sits on the traditional homelands of the people of the Council of Three Fires, the Ojibwe, Potawatomi, and Odawa as well as the Menominee, Miami and Ho-Chunk nations. It was also a site of trade, travel, gathering and healing for more than a dozen other Native tribes and is still home to over 100,000 tribal members in the state of Illinois.

Attendance – Class meetings are central to developing working knowledge in our subject matter and to developing the communication skills necessary for life in the 21st Century. You may miss one class with no questions asked. Compounded absences will inevitably affect your participation grade.

Addendum – Due to social distancing requirements, our class will meet electronically. This may present difficulties due to connectivity, availability of safe streaming location, etc. Please be sure to fill out the e-Learning survey and communicate with me about to your ability to stream. Please see the guidelines for streaming below.

Religious Holidays –

If you celebrate a religious holiday that will conflict with any of the course requirements, please see me during the first two weeks of class to discuss. We will make sure that you can both meet the course requirements and practice your faith fully.

Preparing for class – Please bring all texts, including print-outs of assigned readings posted to Canvas, with you to class. You may not read posted materials from your computer. I have purposefully designed the course to minimize potential financial burdens, but if you require further accommodations, please let me know so that I can make readings available.

Accommodations for Students with Disabilities – Any student requesting accommodations related to a disability or other condition is required to register with AccessibleNU (accessiblenu@northwestern.edu; 847-467-5530) and provide professors with an accommodation notification from AccessibleNU, preferably within the first two weeks of class. All information will remain confidential.

Late work – Late work will not be accepted after it is due. A key part of learning is maintaining a working appreciation of your calendar. We will work together to negotiate our due dates so that they are equitable and accommodating.

Academic Integrity – Academic dishonesty and plagiarism will not be tolerated. It is your responsibility to understand what constitutes academic dishonesty and to familiarize yourself with the school's policies regarding Academic Integrity.

Course Content – For reasons I will discuss during our course meetings, I do not offer case-by-case content warnings. The unique history of enslavement and dispossession that has shaped black experiences in the Atlantic world and beyond means that we will regularly encounter violent language and themes in the course of our discussion. My approach to these topics is to rigorously confront them so as to better understand and ultimately disempower them.

Writing Assignments – Assignments are to be completed in paragraph form using a standard font, font size, and margin size. Assignments will be turned in via Canvas. All assignments should have a title, your name, and page numbers.

E-Learning – Please follow the guidelines below to make for a SAFE and intellectually productive learning environment.

1. Whenever possible, it is best practice to stream with your camera on. Turn the Wi-Fi on your tablets and phones off so as to ensure they are not using bandwidth. If you are unable to stream video, that's ok. Please stream your audio and do your best to remain focused and active during the discussion.
2. Please be sure to stream in appropriate clothing. If you must stream from your bedroom, please do not lie in bed. You may sit on or in front of your bed. These requests are made not to punish you, but rather to protect the integrity of scholarly enterprise conducted from home.
3. Please use headphones and mute your microphone to avoid ambient noise disrupting your synchronous discussions.
4. If you are unable to use video during our discussions, please be sure to upload a picture of yourself so that we can associate a face with your name.
5. Remember that the chat is not a confidential venue for conversation. At times, during screensharing for example, the chat may become visible. Instead, use the chat for conversation if you are unable to communicate through streaming audio, for linking to materials outside the course, and for restating questions and comments.

Grade Review – If you wish to have your grade reviewed, you must wait 24 hours and write an explanation of the reasons for your request that incorporates and responds to the feedback you received. Please remember that grade reviews can result in a lowering of your grade.

^[1] Koritha Mitchell, "Teaching and the N-Word: Questions to Consider,"

<http://www.korithamitchell.com/teaching-and-the-n-word/>

Course Schedule

Reading Schedule:

Week One (1/12)
Introduction (Storytelling)

Tuesday Jan 12: Course introduction, Syllabus Review, Expectations and Q and A
Thursday Jan 14: Read for class: James Baldwin, *If Beale Street Could Talk* (pg. 3-61)
Kyla Wazana Tompkins, ["We're Not Here to Learn What We Already Know"](#)

Week Two (1/19)
The Lockdown (Proof)

Tuesday, Jan 19 Read for class: James Baldwin, *If Beale Street Could Talk* (pg. 61-128)
Thursday, Jan 21: Read for class: Michelle Alexander, "The Lockdown"
View for class: Ava Duvernay, *The Thirteenth*

Skills: Summary, Paraphrase, Quotation

Week Three (1/26)
One Last Anecdote (Explanation)

Tuesday, Jan 26: Read for class: James Baldwin, *If Beale Street Could Talk* (pg. 128-End)
Thursday, Jan 28: Read for class: Patricia Williams, "The Death of the Profane"
View for class: Barry Jenkins, *If Beale Street Could Talk*

Skills: Description

Week Four (2/2)
Witness

Tuesday, Feb 2: Read for class: Jesmyn Ward, *Men We Reaped* (1-80)
Thursday, Feb 4: Read for class: Jennifer Nash, "Unwidowing"

Skills: Critical Reading and Explanation

Week Five (2/9)
Touching Feeling

Tuesday, Feb 9: Read for class: Jesmyn Ward, *Men We Reaped* (81-162)
Thursday, Feb 11: Read for class: Nicole Fleetwood, "Posing in Prison"

Skills: Analysis

Week Six (2/16)
More Mature

Tuesday, Feb 16: Read for class: Jesmyn Ward, *Men We Reaped* (163-255)
Thursday, Feb 18: Read for class: (Optional) Ruth Wilson Gilmore, "Mothers Reclaiming Our Children"

Week Seven (2/23)

Tuesday, Feb 23: Read for class: Colson Whitehead, *The Nickel Boys* (3-96)
Thursday, Feb 25: Read for class: Angela Davis, "The Prison Industrial Complex"

Skills: Theorization

Week Eight (3/2)

Tuesday, Mar 2:	Read for class:	Colson Whitehead, <i>The Nickel Boys</i> (97-210)
Thursday, Mar 4:	Read for class	kihana miraya ross, "Be Real Black For Me" (Optional)

Skills: Argumentation

Week Nine (3/9)

Abolition for the People

Tuesday, Mar 9:	Read for class:	Abolition for the People (Excerpts)
Thursday, Mar 11:	Read for class:	Abolition for the People (Excerpts)

Skills: Contextualization

Assignments

Participation

This class will require your robust participation. That means reading actively and carefully. You will notice that reading for Tuesdays are from primary sources – literary texts including two novels and one memoir. On Thursdays, your readings are from secondary sources. We'll discuss strategies for reading critically and carefully throughout.

You will also develop important strategies for sharing your ideas, including active listening.

Classwork

You will frequently have short classwork assignment. These assignments will be times for you all to turn off your cameras. These assignments will usually take about 10-15 minutes and you will turn in your answers to me.

Free Writing Journal

Writing is a practice and skill, not a talent. And so, it is important to practice writing each week. As such, you will keep a free-writing journal, which you will use to connect the things we're learning about to the practice of written communication. I will often provide you with a journal prompt or else will flag a moment in discussion that you can use to complete your journals. I'll check your journal after we complete each of the primary source readings in the course.

Essay 1

Essay 2

Peer Review