
May Intercession 2026 Course Description

ENGL 39003 Special Topics

ENGL 41403 American Film Survey

ENGL 49303 Studies in Popular Culture and Popular Genres

ENGL 59303 Advanced Studies in Popular Culture and Popular Genres

“Meaningful Mundanity in American Prison and Reentry Films”

Sparks, Leigh

MTWRFS 9:00 a.m. to 12:20 p.m.

PLEASE NOTE: The reading and viewing materials for this course may cover a number of difficult topics, including forms of abuse, forms of violence (including murder), self-harm, substance use disorders, mental health struggles, and parent-child separation.

Reading Materials Required:

Assigned readings will be primarily made up of articles or book chapters, available to class members through links in Blackboard. The primary textbook will be Dawn K. Cecil's *Prison Life in Popular Culture: From The Big House to Orange Is the New Black* (available through the “Library Resources” link in our course’s Blackboard, at the top of the Content page.)

Possible Films/Series to Be Viewed in Class (in full or in part) or Assigned to be Watched Outside of Class (final list TBD):

Apart (documentary film)

Classroom 4 (documentary film)

The Farm: Angola, USA (documentary film)

Jacinta (documentary film)

Life after Lockup (documentary film)

Mothers of Bedford (documentary film)

O.G. (dramatic film)

Orange Is the New Black (select episodes from dramatic series)

Oz (select episodes from dramatic series)

Rectify (select episodes from dramatic series)

Shawshank Redemption (dramatic film)

Sing Sing (dramatic film based on a true story)

Tre Maison Dasan (documentary film)

The Unforgivable (dramatic film)

In addition, students will be asked to view a number of short videos available online through *The New York Times* website (nytimes.com) and [PBS.org](https://www.pbs.org).

Description: The main goal of the course is to encourage analysis and evaluation of the strategies being applied in popular culture (specifically, documentaries, dramatic movies, and news clips) that engage, inform, or otherwise influence the public—especially those with no direct experience of being imprisoned—regarding a range of issues related to incarceration practices and imprisoned or reentering individuals in the U.S. The main question guiding course discussion will be “How effectively does film communicate the severe and complex barriers being faced on a daily basis by U.S. prisoners and returning citizens?”

Essays, exams, and other major requirements: Students will regularly take reading quizzes and submit short responses that focus on the films and readings assigned for the course. There will be a final exam.

M.A. Advisory Codes:

Generalist G: satisfies American Literature and Culture After 1900 requirement.

Specialist 1: satisfies Cultural Studies requirement.