BRUCE JACKSON AND DIANE CHRISTIAN have collaborated on five documentary films: Death Row 1979, Robert Creeley: Willy’s Reading 1982; William August May 1982; Out of Order 1983 and Creeley 1988. They also collaborated on several books, two of which are Death Row (1980) and “In This Timeless Time: Living and Dying on Death Row in America” (2012). Jackson joined the UB faculty (after four years as a member of Harvard’s Society of Fellows) in 1963; Christian joined the UB faculty in 1970, after studying at the Johns Hopkins University, where she received her PhD. Jackson is currently a SUNY Distinguished Professor and Christian a SUNY Distinguished Teaching Professor; they are UB’s only married couple to have achieved that rank. Jackson is also chevalier in France’s Order of Arts and Letters (an award presented by the minister of culture) and chevalier in the Order of Merit (an award presented by the president of France). He is the author or editor of more than 30 books and the recipient of a Grammy nomination and a Guggenheim Fellowship. Christian is the author of books of poetry and essays on violence. The two have been hosting the Buffalo Film Seminars since spring 2000.

(These pages are adapted from the penultimate draft of Bruce Jackson and Diane Christian’s In This Timeless Time: Living and Dying on Death Row in America, University of North Carolina Press, 2012.)

1. Avoiding the Row

Bruce avoided Death Rows for seventeen years. The opportunity was always there, but he didn't take them. During Bruce’s first field trip to a prison (Indiana State Prison at Michigan City, in 1961) the warden offered to show him the electric chair and let him talk to condemned prisoners. He declined. The following summer, the warden of the Missouri State Prison in Jefferson City made a similar offer, though this time the instrument of execution was a gas chamber. Bruce said no to him too. Both prison officials expressed surprise; both said the death house was almost always high on the list of things outsiders wanted to see.

During the years he did research in Texas prisons, which began in the summer of 1964 and continued through the rest of that decade, Bruce could have visited the Row any time.

He thought it reasonable to talk to people about their lives in crime and their adjustments to the world of prison, and he spent a great deal of time doing interviews and recording prisoners’ songs and stories. But he thought the situation of the men on the Row was so precarious and painful that his own academic curiosities were trivial in comparison. He could justify to himself a conversation with a long-term convict about the technology of safecracking or the day-to-day life of getting by in the cotton fields or the building, but he couldn't justify such a conversation with someone waiting for the state of Texas to run several thousand volts of electricity through his body, thereby boiling the liquid in his eyes and veins and so overcooking his brain that smoke poured from the black cloth covering his head, which is how they did it in the days before they killed using medically certified pharmaceuticals.

2. An invitation

In the early 1970s, our prison visits focused on Cummins prison farm in Arkansas, the first prison in the United States to have been found unconstitutional in Federal court. In 1978, Bruce was invited to be the Visiting Distinguished Lecturer at the Criminal Justice Institute at Sam Houston State University in Huntsville, Texas. He was to give a talk titled “The Bureaucratic Crisis in
Public Institutions” and meet with several graduate and undergraduate classes. During that visit he met for the first time James Estelle, who had replaced Dr. George Beto as director of Texas Department of Corrections. They had a cordial meeting, in the course of which Bruce told Estelle that he was no longer doing prison research. Estelle said that if Bruce ever wanted to take up his prison research again the place was still open to him. 

Bruce could, Estelle said, have the same freedom to work without observation or supervision that Dr. Beto had accorded him when he’d done his work there a decade earlier. Bruce thanked him, but had no intention of or interest in taking him up on the offer, which he was sure Estelle knew as well as he did.

While Bruce was in Huntsville, Dr. Beto invited him to a barbecue at the Goree Unit of TDC, which was where women prisoners were housed. “A lot of people you know will be there,” he said. He went. He saw Carl Luther McAdams, long-time warden of Ellis, known everywhere in the prison (but never to his face) as “The Bear” or “Beartracks.” He saw D. V. “Red” McCaskle, who would, in a few years, when Estelle resigned under fire, become acting director of the system. He saw Oscar “Slim” Savage, whom he’d known as an Ellis field major and who would become a highly-respected warden. And he saw Billy Macmillan, whom he’d met on his first visit to the Texas prisons in 1964 when Macmillan was a field sergeant at Ramsey Unit, one of the prisons on the Brazos River southwest of Houston. The last time Bruce had seen him had been in 1967 when Macmillan had been a field major on Ellis. He was now an assistant director of the prison system.

Billy Macmillan said TDC was presently going through a massive lawsuit. He asked Bruce if he would be willing to testify in federal court about changes in the prison system since he first did research there in 1964 and about how TDC compared to other state prison systems he’d visited.

Billy Macmillan knew that Bruce’s politics were far to the left of anybody they knew in combination with them. Bruce would write articles criticizing prison administrations in Atlantic Monthly, New York Times Magazine, The Nation and other such places. He also knew that Bruce had testified as an expert witness in criminal cases in federal court, always for the defense.

Macmillan asked Bruce if he would testify in an upcoming case in Federal court in Houston about Texas prison conditions.

Bruce said he’d do it if he could visit all the prisons again so he wasn’t talking in the abstract. He hadn’t been in Texas prisons for nearly a decade. Billy said arrangements would be made for him to visit any place he wanted to see for as long as he liked.

Bruce said, "If I testify, I’ll say what I think is wrong with the place too."

"As long as you say what you’ve seen," Macmillan said, "I don’t care what you say." Bruce hadn’t a doubt that Billy Macmillan meant that, so he said he would do it.

3. Building tenders
And so, in 1978, Bruce began visiting Texas prisons once again. He had long thought TDC was at once the most repressive and the safest of American prisons: prisoners there had the least freedom and the greatest chance of serving their sentences without physical harm. He never thought that TDC was a safe place—no prison is a safe place, and he’d never been in a prison where some people didn’t brutalize and exploit other people. It was only that he thought there had been less of it in TDC in the years he did research there than he’d found or heard about in prisons he’d visited in Indiana, Missouri, New York, California, Arkansas and Washington.

The system had two more units in operation than it had when he’d done his research in the 1960s—fifteen rather than thirteen separate prisons; it also had more than twice the convict population—25,000 rather than 12,000. The plaintiffs in the pending court case, Ruiz v. Estelle, argued that repressive measures and the increasing overcrowding were so extreme as to be unconstitutional. They also argued that the building tender system—the prison’s use of inmates to control other inmates in the buildings and thereby keep costs to a minimum—led to a wide range of abuses, such as beatings, sexual exploitation, and extortion.

Bruce had heard stories of building tender abuses when he’d done research in TDC, but he’d never seen any of it. That didn’t lead him to discount the stories any more than the fact that he’d never seen a policeman beat anyone up on the streets led him to discount stories about some policemen sometimes beating people up. Officials who engage in such behaviors tend to be careful when and where they engage in them and about who gets to see them doing it. He’d had conversations with Dr. Beto about the building tender system in which he’d said that he thought it was a critical part of the actual, but informal, structure of the institution. The building tenders appeared in no organizational charts but the prison couldn’t get through a day without them.

Dr. Beto told Bruce they were the most recalcitrant structural problem he had to deal with, one of the few things he’d never been able to get control over. A promising sociology graduate student at Texas A&M several times spoke with Bruce while he was trying to find a PhD thesis topic. Bruce urged him to look at the building tenders. He studied the correctional officers instead, and it remained for Ruiz v. Estelle to look into the Texas building tender system and finally blow it, and the entire prison system, apart.

4. Documenting the Row
One of his 1978 visits was to Death Row on the Ellis Unit, twelve miles northeast of Huntsville. Very quickly he saw how the Row differed from the rest of the prison. None of the usual prison markers of behavior mattered there because the Row was the single place where the rhetoric of rehabilitation was meaningless (one was there waiting to die, not to be improved), the rhetoric of punishment was inappropriate (the punishment was not time served on the Row but execution), and nobody there spoke of “doing time” because nobody there was doing time.

When he came home from that trip he said to Diane that someone should do a study of life on the Row: How did the men survive? What were the ways in which they made existence meaningful? What were the relationships between the condemned men and their guards? How did the prison officials justify this set of prison conditions that differed so radically from the conditions in the regular cellblock directly across the hall? What did the Row look like? Someone should do those things, but not him. He’d moved on.

That July, the two of us took part in a conference put on by the Institute for the American West and the Sun Valley Institute of Arts and Humanities. At a reception for the participants in Ketchum, we met Carey McWilliams, who in
1971 had gotten Bruce to start contributing articles on prison problems to *The Nation*, which McWilliams then edited. Bruce had never met him before that conversation in Ketchum, but he’d long held him in high regard as a journalist and editor. Bruce told McWilliams about his recent visits to the Row and said that he thought someone should document it, someone should even film it.

"Right," Carey said. "When are you going to do it?"

"No," Bruce said. "It's too depressing. And I don't want to be a voyeur."

"Don't be silly," Carey said. "For one thing, it ought to be done. For another, you've got the access. So go do it."

"I don't want to do it," Bruce said. Carey scowled. Bruce said he was a writer, not a filmmaker; writers work alone, filmmakers have to work with other people. It was a different kind of work entirely. Carey would have none of it. He again said the key line: "You've got the access."

So the following spring, the two of us went and did it.

We knew we had to do a film and a book. The film would show what the rhythm of the place was like and what the people who lived there were like; the book would provide the space for discourse film can't afford.

Neither of us had ever made a film before, but we'd been marginally involved with another film that same year, so we had an idea what things cost and how film budgets looked and the sort of work that had to be done. At the time (1978) the accepted rough guideline for 16mm color documentary film production was $1,500 per minute. We couldn't afford that, so we decided to do a thirty-minute black-and-white film. On the basis of the Death Row project description and some video footage Bruce had shot with a Sony Portapak videotape machine in the Arkansas penitentiary a few years earlier, Bruce was awarded a $10,000 Independent Filmmaker's grant by the American Film Institute. The two of us received a grant for the book portion of the work from the Fund for Investigative Journalism. We asked one New York foundation interested in criminal justice matters for $65,000 for the film; they said no. It was a nice no, so we wrote again and asked for $25,000; they again said no and told us how much the rejection pained them. We wrote back and said it pained us far more, so how about $8,500; we threatened that if they didn't give us the money we wouldn't ask any more. They gave it to us, but made us promise we wouldn't use their name in the credits (we didn't). The Polaroid Corporation gave us two cases of SX-70 film so we could give everyone on the Row snapshots to send home without having to wait for me to make prints in my darkroom back home; the SX-70 snapshots would be useful to us because we could use a set of the Polaroid images to keep the names straight. The Levi Strauss Foundation contributed a few thousand dollars and so did the Playboy Foundation. In all, we had grants for about $25,000, so we decided to make a sixty-minute color film. We were $65,000 short of the accepted production minimum, but we had enough to do the location work and get the film processed.

We figured the rest of the money would come in later. Anyway, those $1,500 budgets were based on films with lots of people, all of whom got paid. No one except the cameraman got paid for working on *Death Row*; the two of us would do all the other work ourselves. In retrospect, knowing what we later learned about the costs of film production and the complexity of film editing, we were hugely naïve.

We wrote letters to everyone on the Row explaining our purpose and saying we thought the work would give them an opportunity to tell the outside world what they thought about where they were. If the Row was the place most isolated from outside eyes, it was also the place insiders were most cut off from outside conversations. We weren't going to argue anything in our film, we told them; we were just going to show people a place about which they knew nothing. Three men wrote us back saying they'd be happy to help out however they could. That seemed enough for a start.

Our cameraman, our volunteer grip from the media services department at Sam Houston State University, and Bruce arrived at Ellis early on a Tuesday morning in late March. Diane was to arrive the next afternoon. Our plan at first was that the three of us would work on the filming while Diane did long interviews elsewhere in the prison. As it turned out, her interviews not only suggested things Bruce should film and conversations he should have on camera on the Row, but became the major part of our book about the Row. And often things people said to Bruce in interviews or in conversation on the Row became substantial elements in Diane’s much longer conversations with those same people later.

We had several reasons for Diane doing her interviews in another space. If the prison authorities had agreed to let us film with her on the Row, they would have insisted on having guards around while we were working, and that would have ruined the interviews and changed the mood. Even with all the access we had, that was still rural Texas in 1979 and there was no way in the world they would have let a woman walk around Death Row without a lot of official protection. It was only five years since Fred Carrasco, Ignacio Cuevas and Rudolfo Dominguez took fourteen hostages at The Walls in an escape attempt that resulted in Carrasco, Dominguez, and two women hostages dead and Cuevas on Death Row. We couldn't have worked in the cells, and if she’d done her interviews in the day room, that would have interfered with the ordinary recreation schedules. In addition, the toilets in the cells face out to the runs; like just about every other place in a penitentiary, there is no privacy on Death Row. Had Diane been there all day long, new
and uncomfortable constraints would've been placed on the residents.

5. Bona fides
The first day was a disaster. Our reception was icy and hostile. Hostility on Death Row is like hostility in few other places. Someone on one row said to Bruce, "We hear you're a witness against the convicts in Ruiz."

Death Row is a noisy place in the day—toilets flush, the eight television sets are on constantly, radios blare, people call back and forth to each other, cell doors roll open and shut, the hallway door rattles open and clangs shut. Even so, he had the feeling that men all the way up to three row heard the question and were listening for the answer.

"I'm testifying about what I've seen here over the years. I'd say the same thing if I was testifying for the plaintiffs."

"My lawyer wrote me that I could be in the film," another said, "but he told me I shouldn't do it unless he's here while you're doing it."

"Where is he?"
"He lives in New York."

The lawyer's name was Joel Berger. He had written the same letter to many other inmates on the Row. He hadn't told them not to talk to us at all but he was going to make it as difficult as he could for us anyway. The following week one of the prisoners told Bruce that Berger was in the visiting room. Bruce found him there and asked why he hadn't at least let us know he was writing that letter, since he knew we were coming down from upper New York state with a film crew. "I'm a lawyer," Berger said, "I'm a very busy person. I don't have time to be writing letters to people."

"But if you had shown me the letter we could have worked something out."

"I told you: I'm a lawyer. I'm too busy for that."

Paul Rougeau, who was in cell fifteen on one row, showed Bruce Berger's letter and said, "I want to be in the movie. I don't like somebody in New York thinking I'm too stupid to know what I can say and what I can't say in a movie." We filmed him. We filmed Thomas Andrew Barefoot getting a haircut and shaving in his cell and talking about rules. Barefoot also talked about the letter and also said he didn't like being told whom he should and shouldn't talk to.

In the moment, Bruce was furious at Berger. The three of us had friends in common in the New York civil rights legal community. He could, Bruce thought, have shown a little collegiality. But Bruce was, in fact, thinking far too much about the same thing. They have everything to lose. Everything. Often my clients would say damaging things, given the opportunity to say them. The guys who are there are frequently there because they had stunningly bad judgment. There were enormous stakes for them in saying anything to you guys at all."

Even though we'd filmed Andy Barefoot and Paul Rougeau, the mood on the Row still seemed cold and suspicious. Bruce was in despair: after all those years of not doing anything about the Row and after all those months of scuffling for the money to get started, it looked like he might as well pack up, cut the losses, and go home. The crew did some filming, and Bruce taped some interviews and took some photographs, not working too close to anybody.

While Jerry and Gary were packing up the gear for the day (they had one shot set up for the next morning; if things didn't pick up after that we were through) Bruce walked along the three tiers of the cellblock talking to anyone who wanted to talk. There weren't many who did. On the third tier was Larry Ross, who was in cell three, between Kerry Max Cook and Raymond Riles. Larry had written us an enthusiastic letter saying he looked forward to participating in the film, but that morning on the Row he'd said that he'd be happy to give us advice, but he certainly couldn't be in the film. "You may think I misled you," he'd said, "and you'd be right. But I happened to change my mind, you see." Bruce suppressed several things he thought would be fine responses, nodded, and started to move on. Ross called Bruce back. He wanted to chat. He said that he was into theosophy. He asked what kind of books Bruce wrote. Bruce said it was difficult to describe them. He asked to see one.

Diane had urged Bruce to bring a few of his prison books along on this trip. "What's the point of that?" he'd said. "They'll just add weight and take up space." "Bring them anyway," she said, "you never know."

He went down to one row and took from one of the bags copies of Killing Time, which consists of photographs and bits and pieces from conversations of documents he gathered during his eight visits to Cummins prison in Arkansas from 1971 through 1975, and In the Life, a book of observations on working in crime and living in prison from interviews he'd done in Massachusetts, Indiana, Illinois, Texas, and a few other places from 1962 through 1971. He left the two books with Ross on the third tier and went to the motel. Jerry and he didn't talk about the state of things in the car on the drive back to Huntsville. Jerry didn't understand how precarious the situation was; he was still getting over the shock of realizing where this film was being made and who was taking part in it. His previous filming experience had mostly been with commercials.

When Bruce, Jerry and Gary got back to the Row at 6:30 the next morning the books were in cell twenty-one of one row. Bruce later learned they had been handed from cell to cell all along the twenty inhabited cells of three row (the first cell of each row is the shower), whereupon someone got the J-23 night porter, John Hayter, to bring them down to two row, where they made the same passage, whereupon Hayter carried them down to one row, where they did it a third time. Bruce fetched the two books from Billy Woods (who would be executed April 14, 1997) in cell twenty-one of one row, sixty cells from where he'd passed them through the bars to Larry Ross. People said hello cheerily. People chatted. Someone on three row said, "I read them books. You don't tell the convicts' side and you don't tell the man's side. You just tell your side. Can't ask for more than that. I'll be in your movie."

"Me too," said the man in the adjacent cell.

Bruce and Jerry set to work and the day was a good one. Some men on the Row were still distant, but there seemed to be none of the hostility or coldness of the previous day. The crew filmed, did interviews, took photographs.
6. “I’d like to cut your fucken throat”

About 11:00 A.M., while we were filming on one row, Gerald Bodde called down from cell four on two row and said he wanted to be interviewed. We had enough shots set up for the rest of the day, so we told him we’d interview him right after lunch on Thursday. About every hour for the rest of the day and two or three times Thursday morning he called down and reminded us about the interview. Bruce finally told him that if he asked one more time we wouldn’t do it. Actually, Bruce didn't mind at all having him call down like that because he thought it would encourage others to take part more enthusiastically.

He had things exactly backward. The interview with Bodde Thursday nearly brought everything to a dead stop. Bruce and Jerry began the interview a little after noon. They spent perhaps an hour filming in the day room. Bodde told being gang-raped in the county jail and how he'd been an informer there and then on the Row.

In Texas in those years, and many other states as well, men who took the role of being penetrated sexually in prison only were called "punks"; those who were gay in the free world as well were called "queens." Queens had much higher status than punks because, as we’ve heard many convicts put it, “They're man enough to admit what they are.” Punks were seen as submitting out of weakness and fear, and prison is a place where strength and weakness (or the appearance of either) count for a great deal. Being an informer in prison is worse than being a punk. Being an informer isn't nearly so bad as being known as one. There are many times a regular convict decides informing is moral or practical: to prevent a killing that will result in tighter restrictions on everyone, for example, or to cut out new competition in one of the prison hustles. Being a punk is always bad, being an informer is bad if done for the wrong reasons; being known as both a punk and a snitch is about as bad as it can get as far as inside roles go.

Bodde said he didn't look forward to having his sentence commuted to life because if he were ever sent into the population he'd be killed. "They'd all like to get me if they could," he said. They finished the interview, Bodde returned to his cell, and Bruce and Jerry moved the camera back out to one row to film the afternoon's commissary run.

While Jerry and the grip were setting the lights, Bruce went to see someone on two row. As he walked along the run, Excell White in cell six said in a low voice, "You lousy cocksucker, I'd like to cut your fucken throat." "Me too," said John Quinones in cell seven.

Under the best of circumstances that would not be a good thing to hear. On Death Row, it's unnerving.

The guard called Group Two out for recreation. Group Two included everyone in the last five cells on one row and the first ten cells on two row. The cell doors of those men in group two who weren’t on restriction rolled and those men who wanted to go to recreation came out onto the run and filed along the narrow iron corridor and down the tier of iron stairs, past the guard’s desk and into the dayroom. White and Quinones were in Group Two. Bruce knew that if he didn't get this cleared up we were finished working on Death Row, so he followed the group in there.

"Knock when you want to come out," the guard said as he closed the door and locked it from the other side.
He found Jerry and they went back to filming on one row. A little while later, the group in the day room came out and returned to their cells. Bruce could see, at the periphery of his vision, Excell White standing close to the bars of his cell on two row. After a while, Emery Harvey, one of the porters, brought Bruce a note. "From Excell White on two row," he said. Bruce saw Excell watching Harvey hand him the note. He put the note into his shirt pocket and went on with the shot. He could have read it then, but didn't want to. He was really angry by that time. Being angry was probably his way of coping with the understanding that he shouldn't have gone into the day room after Excel’s threat.

After a while he went under the tier of the walkway, out of sight of two row, and read the note. It said, "It is important that I talk to you immediately. Please come to my cell," followed by Excell’s signature and cell number. He put the note back in his pocket and went back to work. A few minutes later, where Excell could see him, he took the note out, read it, then looked up and nodded. He was still standing at the bars. When they finished the shot Bruce went up to the cell.

"Look" Excell said, "about what I said before. I was wrong, okay? We talked about it after you left. If we want this movie to tell people what Death Row is like we've got to work on it with you. You guys can't do it by yourselves." Bruce nodded. "So can I be in the movie?" he said. "Yes," Bruce said.

"Me too," said John Quinones in the next cell.

7. Trust
That was it. After that incident the only people we asked to be in the movie or on tape or in photographs who said no were men who for specific reasons couldn't afford to have themselves documented. One was Candyman, Ronald Clark O'Bryan, convicted of spiking his eight-year-old son's Halloween candy with cyanide for the insurance; he felt he'd had too much publicity already and had hopes of a new trial (he didn't get it; on March 31, 1984, Candyman became the third post-Furman execution in Texas). Another said his seventy-five-year-old mother thought he worked in another part of the country; his brother remailed his letters to her so she wouldn't know where he was. "If she found out I was down here," he said, "it would kill her. But I'll be happy to talk to Diane about anything you two like," which he did. He let Bruce take photographs of him if Bruce promised not to show them to anyone; Bruce took the photos and, since he's still there doing a life sentence, we haven't shown them to anyone. A third was a former college teacher on the Row for his involvement in the murder of his girlfriend's parents for the insurance. We don't know what his reasons were because he never talked to us at all except to comment on the weather. He spent a lot of time doing exercises in his cell: pushups on the floor, chin-ups on the bars. In 1987 he got a reversal. Then the key witness in his first trial said she wouldn't testify in a second trial, the prosecutor dropped the case, and the charges against him were dismissed. As far as we know, there was only one other resident of J-23 who still hung back.

But it wasn’t just our efforts that got people to talk to us and to trust us. It was also things neither of us knew anything about until later. One of the porters, John Hayter, who had spent most of his life in Texas prisons, told Diane that he had been on Ramsey Unit when Bruce had done research there in the 1960s and he had read an article Bruce had published in Texas Monthly about Ellis prison farm a few months before we came down there in April 1979. “I keep telling these guys,” he told Diane, “this man don’t tell nobody’s story but his own.” He told her that he told them that no heat had come down on anyone for anything anyone had said to Bruce on Ramsey and that he thought the Texas Monthly article nailed Ellis prison better than anything he’d seen. “I’d go down them runs,” he said, “and tell them, ‘Talk to that man.’”

And they did. Even though some could never accept the notion that anyone who walked around and sat in the cells shooting pictures and making recordings without any guard nearby could be doing it unless he was an agent of the state, most men on the Row, to a smaller or larger measure, decided to trust us, and for that the two of us remain grateful to this day.

Our conversations, though in different parts of the prison, constantly informed one another. Things would turn up in Diane’s long conversations Bruce knew nothing about and at night in the motel, when we were reloading the film magazines and charging the batteries for the cameras and recorders, she’d suggest people Bruce hadn’t met whom he should seek out and things he should talk to them about. Sometimes Bruce would film or tape someone on the Row, then Diane would interview the same person at length and would later say to Bruce, “Did So-and-so tell you about…” and Bruce would say “No;” and Diane would say, “If you have time, you should film him again and ask him about that.” And the next day Bruce would do that. Sometimes it went in the other direction: people would say to one of us something they knew the other of us was interested in. Diane would have a long conversation with someone about a certain subject and the next day on the Row someone else would mention to Bruce that he knew a lot about that subject and maybe Diane would like to call him down for a chat, or someone would say to Diane, “You might tell Bruce to ask me about….” And Bruce would.

Once the Death Row community decided we were reasonable people and that the work was worthwhile and participation was in their interest, we had a new problem: it was
impossible to film or interview or photograph everyone who wanted to be filmed or interviewed or photographed. “Bruce had not enough the first day,” Charles Rigsby told Diane, “and too many now. Everybody wants to talk to him.” People would say to Bruce, “When’s your wife going to call me out to talk?” The filming, photographing and interviewing became—for the time we were there—part of life on the Row.

It wasn’t just rapport with the Death Row prisoners that was necessary. We also had to seem reasonable and the project useful to the convict trustees who worked on the Row as well as the guards and other staff, even the medical technician. Only two staff members wouldn’t talk to us: the doctor, whose English wasn’t very good and who didn’t talk very much to anybody, and the Baptist minister.

8. Why talk?
What we’ve just written tells you how we remember having gotten around an impediment to conversation and filming on the Row, but it doesn’t tell you why those men talked to us and let us film and photograph them. What if there had been no problem about Bruce’s status or interviewing Bodde. Why would they have bothered talking to us then?

Some men on the Row would have talked to us because they thought there was always a chance we might have helped them in their cases. They didn’t know how and they didn’t know if, but Death Row is a place where almost every other avenue of help has failed or been exhausted. Why not talk to us? Once they decided we weren’t harmful, they concluded there was nothing to lose by dealing with us as if we might be helpful. In that, as Billy Sothern pointed out, we were all naive: someone could have said something that might have harmed his case if it had gotten out. We count ourselves fortunate that nothing like that ever happened.

Some men talked because they wanted people outside to know what the place was like. Some talked because we gave them a chance to vent their grievances against the criminal justice system or the prison administration or other residents of the Row. Some talked because they thought the film might do some real good.

Some men talked to Bruce only because they liked Diane. She’d interview someone for a few hours down the hall and that man would say to a friend, “You should go talk to that lady,” and he’d give reasons, and the friend would do just that. Then the friend would decide Bruce was all right because he was married to Diane.

And one more reason—one we think of major importance for many of the men who took part in the film and who talked to Diane in connection with the book and who chatted with Bruce while he photographed them or the objects in their cells—was discussed by Rosalie Wax in reference to her research in Nisei Relocation Centers during World War II. “While I would like to think that the data I obtained there bear some relationship to my personal skill,” Wax wrote, “it would be gross self-deception not to admit that many informants talked to me week after week partly because there was nothing more interesting to do”.

9. Punishing Diane

We wrote earlier that the whole time we were there Diane worked down the corridor so she could have extended conversations with people without being disturbed and so she wouldn’t disturb the life of the Row by being a woman in a place in which women were hardly ever seen or someone whose presence evoked a disruptive bureaucratic protection response. All along, we planned that on the last day we were there she would come down to the Row to see where everybody lived and to join me in saying goodbye. We were counting on it and the men on the Row were counting on it. Even in a few weeks you make real connections with people.

So that last day came. We were both emotionally burnt out. Death Row is like the terminal cancer ward: it is a place where everyone works at being alive but everyone, staff and inmate alike, is aware of very powerful, in all likelihood ineluctable, forces waiting and working to kill. The Row is all about death and everyone there knows it. The people who live and work there deal with it every day and they have ways of doing that. Some of them can’t keep the façade up and, as we noted earlier, they do things to themselves or they go inside themselves to places other people cannot get, or they talk all night long to people who live in the pipe chase or they simply bang their head again and again against the steel edge of the bunk bolted to the cement wall of their cell.

Our solution was to go home, back to Buffalo with our reels of 16mm film negative, our audiotapes, our photographic negatives, our Polaroids, our notes. On that last day Clyde Byars, the old lifer who’d been our assistant the whole time we’d been there, helped Bruce load up all the equipment into two laundry carts. Bruce went up to the front sallyport to get Diane to bring her back down to the Row. All the men she’d talked to were waiting to say goodbye, as were some who hadn’t met her but who had wanted to and who had been told that on this day they would. A few women reporters had done brief interviews in the day room previously, and some had done interviews in the visiting room, but none had come every day for two weeks, doing long and interconnected conversations about daily life on Death Row.

It was a Saturday afternoon. Warden Bob Cousins, who’d been helpful to us in every way he might, was off that day, so his assistant warden, Eli Rushing, was sitting at Bob Cousins’ desk. We went in and told him we were all set to go, so we wanted to go down to the Row now to say goodbye.

“Well,” Rushing said, looking at Bruce, “you can go, but she can’t. I can’t let her go down there.”

“Why not?” Bruce said.

“Security,” he said.

“What are you talking about?” Bruce said. “It’s Saturday afternoon. The place is totally locked down. There’s nobody in the corridor but C.O.s and building tenders.”

“Yeah, but one of those convicts might yell something nasty from one of the day rooms.”

“So what?”

“We couldn’t have that,” he said. He leaned back in Bob Cousins’ chair, his boots on the desk.

“Why would they do that?” Bruce said. “I’ve never heard anybody yell out here.” That was true: Ellis was a very tight prison then, the tightest prison Texas had. And the day rooms were separated from the corridor by frosted glass blocks:
even if someone in one of them yelled you couldn’t see him or hear him anyway.

“... ‘They might. Couldn’t have that with a lady.’

“I can deal with it.” Diane said.

“Sorry,” he said, smiling. “Security, you know?”

He was lying. He was getting even for something. Who knows for what? Maybe because Diane had gotten close to some of the D.R.s. Maybe he didn’t like women. Maybe he didn’t like me. Maybe he didn’t like the idea of outsiders coming in and having the run of the place and he couldn’t do a damned thing about it. He couldn’t go after me. So he punished Diane. And he punished the guys on the Row waiting to say goodbye to her. Rushing had been warden on Eastham prison farm, another prison, and now he was somebody else’s assistant: maybe he was just pissed off in general and getting even with everybody. Maybe he was just doing it because he could.

Diane went out to the car and Bruce went down to the Row where Clyde was waiting. They got the gear and went out to the corridor. At the last moment Bruce turned and looked back and saw mirrors sticking out from the cells the whole length of one row, from cell two all the down the run to cell twenty. Faces in those mirrors—Fred, Andy, Pete, Kenny, Skeet, Moses, Donnie, Wolf, Paul, Billy, Jack, and all the others—all down the run, watching him go. He thought to take a picture of it, but couldn’t see to focus so he didn’t.

As they walked up the hall, Clyde started to chat, caught his mood and went quiet. He went with Bruce as far as the corridor sallyport where someone else helped him the rest of the way through the front entryway, and through the outside sallyport to the car.

Bruce got in the car and told Diane about the mirrors. He told her that Clyde tried to talk to him as we went up the corridor but he couldn’t talk to Clyde because he was weeping. She didn’t say anything so, before he moved the car out of the lot, he looked at her and saw she was weeping too. “That sonofabitch,” she said, “that lousy fucking sonofabitch. He did it because they talked to me.” She didn’t say, but we both knew, that the capricious and arbitrary bit of cruelty Rushing had come up with a little while earlier was something the men on the Row lived with, in larger and lesser measure, every day of their lives.

10. Testifying
That fall, we worked on the film and book. We took a few days out of that when Bruce went down to Houston to testify in Ruiz. He was testifying for the state but had a lot of friends in common with the lawyers for the plaintiffs, so their lead attorney, William Bennett Turner, asked us if we would join his team for dinner the night before he went on the stand. Ed Idar, the Texas assistant attorney general handling the case for the plaintiffs, said after our encounter in the day room months earlier, their story, not ours. So we agreed that if the Row didn’t like the film we’d throw it out. We just wouldn’t show it to anybody else.

During the dinner, he asked Bruce, "With what you're saying, why aren't you testifying for our side?"

"I would have," Bruce said, “but you never asked. I wish there were some way I could just go in and say what I knew without belonging to one side or the other.”

"You can't do that in court," Turner said.

"I know," Bruce said.

He asked Bruce what he thought was the biggest change in TDC since he’d worked there ten years earlier. Bruce told him it was the overcrowding and that he thought some of the most severe problems he’d seen resulted from that. The overcrowding was terrible. 'I hope you guys ask me some questions about it when you cross-examine tomorrow.' Turner said he certainly would.

As it turned out, not one of the three lawyers who examined Bruce asked him about overcrowding: Ed Idar, the prison’s attorney, didn’t because it wasn’t his job to put information detrimental to their case in the record; Turner didn’t, perhaps because he thought Bruce was setting them up, or maybe he already had enough in his case about overcrowding and didn’t need Bruce adding to it.

It didn't matter: the plaintiffs won anyway, and won big. Judge William Wayne Justice accepted nearly every aspect of the plaintiffs’ complaint and it resulted in massive changes in the way the prison operated. The management system that used convict trustees as intermediaries between convicts and authorities was abolished. The legislature grew so fond of its prison system that it built more and more prisons and made sentences longer and longer, so Texas now has more people locked up than any other state in the union, indeed, more than most countries. And Texas has also become one of the nation’s most violent and dangerous of the American prison systems. The safest place and most restrictive place in all of the more than one hundred public and private prisons in Texas is now, as it was when we did this work, Death Row.

11. Screening Death Row
The first screening of the film was on the Row itself in the afternoon of December 13, 1979. The lab that made the film prints for us also made several U-Matic video copies (bulky cassettes with ¾” tape that were used for broadcast at that time). Someone at the prison got a U-Matic deck and fed it into the sixteen television sets bolted to the walls of J-21 and J-23.

This time, Diane made it down to the Row. Assistant Warden Eli Rushing was nowhere about and Warden Bob Cousins did everything he could to make the visit simple for everybody.

We were scheduled to premiere the 16mm film in the large auditorium at the Sam Houston State College Criminal Justice Center that night. We both worried what the people who lived and worked on the Row would think of it. It was, as Excell White had said after our encounter in the day room months earlier, their story, not ours. So we agreed that if the Row didn’t like the film we’d throw it out. We just wouldn’t show it to anybody else.

We watched it on J-23. Diane sat in a folding iron chair and, when Bruce wasn’t taking pictures, he sat in the barber chair. Some of the porters and guards who worked the Row watched it with us. There were other porters and guards watching along with the prisoners over on J-21. The D.R.s all watched from their cells.
Other than occasional laughter and a bit of yelling at Brandon, the only time anybody made any noise during the fifty-nine-minute screening was when Bodde said, “They’d all like to get to me if they could.” He was talking about the people he thought wanted to kill him because he was a punk and a snitch. Someone up on three row yelled, “Who wants you, you sonofabitch?” We were both very embarrassed for Bodde and thought he must feel awful.

As the film played out Bruce saw one thing after another wrong with it, one point after another we hadn’t made or hadn’t made well enough. He thought it was a disaster. When it was over, everybody clapped and yelled. The two of us visited everybody in all the death row cells on both sides. Bodde, as it turned out, was delighted: “See,” he said, “I told you they didn’t like me.” Maybe the first time Bruce felt really comfortable about it was when Excell looked at us through the bars and just nodded, and a moment later a guard we didn’t know said, “I’m gonna make my wife come to that screening tonight at the college so she’ll finally know what I’ve been talking about the last two years.”

Brandon had been moved over to two row on J21. “He was excited about your coming today,” the building major said, “so they gave him a whole bunch of tranquilizers to make sure he was all calmed down.”

When we got to Brandon’s cell he was at the bars and bouncing back and forth the same way he always did. He’d been on cell restriction after he smashed the jar on the bars of Donny Crawford’s cell, so he and Diane had never met when we’d worked on the row the previous spring. He looked at her, grinned, and said, “So you’re Diane. You’re one beautiful mama. I want to shake your hand.”

There was dead silence on the run and everybody knew what everybody else was thinking. The building major, who was standing next to Diane, went absolutely rigid. Brandon kept grinning at all of us. Diane said, “Thank you,” and put her hand in front of the bars. Brandon took it in his. Brandon was a very large man and Diane’s hand just about disappeared from sight. We all knew that, if he wished, Brandon could pull Diane’s arm out of its socket in an instant.

All he did was hold it a moment longer, smile again, and let it go. Everyone relaxed. Then he said, “And Bruce, my man, now I want to shake your hand.” He grinned again, knowing exactly what everyone was thinking this time too.

Bruce put his hand out. Brandon he took it in his, gently pulled it inside the bars, looked at Bruce, looked at Diane, looked a long time at the building major who was in a condition we thought close to panic, and then he shook Bruce’s hand, held it a long time, and finally said, “It’s good to see you.” And so it was.

12. Brent Bullock, Jr. & Norman Mailer
The screening at the college that night was a disaster. The large auditorium was full with an audience comprised of prison workers and families, faculty and students, and some family of prisoners. Someone introduced us and the film, the room was darkened, it grew quiet, the film started, and the room stayed quiet. Dead silent.

There wasn’t a sound from the soundtrack. Bruce yelled out, “This is a talkie!” Nothing happened. The film rolled on. Bruce went to the projection booth and tried the door. It was locked. Bruce knocked. No one answered. He pounded. No one answered. He yelled and pounded. No one answered. He went back to his seat. About ten minutes into the film the sound came on, only it was distant and thin. We later found out that when the projectionist couldn’t get the sound to work properly, instead of stopping the film and fixing the problem, he’d put a microphone close to the projection room monitor speaker and piped that into the auditorium.

When it was over there was polite applause, but we didn’t know if anyone there had made out a word. George Beto, former director of both the prison system and the Criminal Justice Center, came over and said, “If I were still director of this Center that man in that booth would already be looking for his next job.” We were furious and disappointed, but happy because, if it had to go wrong at one of the two places, we both preferred that it go wrong outside the wire.

We were staying at the hotel that was part of the huge Criminal Justice Center operation. After the reception, we went to our room and muttered for hours. The next morning, before heading down to Houston for our plane back to Buffalo, we had breakfast in the hotel’s dining room.

A friendly young man at another table introduced himself to us and said he’d been at the screening the previous evening and that he’d liked the film.

“Could you make out any of the words?”

“Of course,” he said.

He told us that his name was Brent Bullock, Jr., and that he was an investigator in the Provo, Utah, sheriff’s office. He was in Huntsville for a workshop at the Criminal Justice Center. He told us he had worked as an investigator on the Gary Gilmore case in Provo and had been present at Gilmore’s execution by firing squad on January 17, 1977.

He asked us if we knew Norman Mailer. Bruce said he’d met Mailer once, but hardly knew him. “Did you read The Executioner’s Song?” Bullock asked. That was Mailer’s recent thousand-page book on Gilmore and his execution. Bruce had finished reading it on the plane coming down two days earlier. We asked him what he thought of it.

He critiqued the book, mostly in terms of things he thought Mailer had gotten wrong about some of the people he’d
spent time with in Utah. Then he went on to talk about several other Mailer books he’d read in years past. We remember him saying very smart things about *The Naked and the Dead* (which he liked and had reread), *Marilyn* (which he thought exploitative and cheap), and *An American Dream* (which he thought silly). He hadn’t read them in connection with a class or anything like that: he was just a cop in the American southwest and he liked to read books and think about them. Going over that part of the conversation later, we agreed that his comments on the books were right up there with our smartest graduate students.

Brent Bullock, Jr. was the kind of reader most writers dream about: someone who reads out of interest and who responds to the words and ideas.

“You’re not a friend of his?” he asked us again. We said we weren’t. Then he told us about Mailer’s research in Provo. Mailer, he said, had come in after Lawrence Schiller had done a lot of preliminary interviews for the Gary Gilmore book. Schiller had bought the rights to Gilmore’s story and he’d hired Mailer to do the book. Mailer had come to their office one day, told them his name, and said that he was a world-famous writer there to write a book about Gary Gilmore. “We said, ‘Okay, we’ll help you.’ We would have said that to anybody.”

“Did he know you’d read his books?” Diane asked.

“No. He never asked so I never said. A lot of people in the office had read his books. They never said anything either.”

“So how did it go?” Bruce asked.

“He interviewed everybody and looked through the files. We gave him whatever he needed.” He paused.

“What?” Bruce said.

“Every morning when he got to the office, he’d ask for whoever he wanted to see and the receptionist would push down a button and say into her phone, ‘Mr. Mailer is here to see…. And she’d say the name. Then she’d say to Mailer, ‘I’m sorry, but he’s in conference right now. He said to have a seat and he’ll be with you soon.’ Mailer would have a seat and exactly fifteen minutes later she’d say, ‘He can see you now, Mr. Mailer, please go right in.’ The thing was, when she made that call when he got there, it wasn’t to anybody in particular. It was to the office P.A. It was the announcement for the morning coffee break. Whenever Mailer got there, we took our morning coffee break. That went on for months.”

“Did he ever catch on?” Diane asked.

“No,” Brent Bullock said. “He never knew we had a sense of humor.”

Then his tone changed. He told us some things about working on Gilmore’s two murders and attending the execution at the state penitentiary two years earlier. “I believe in the death penalty,” he said, “and I had no regrets at all when Gary Gilmore was executed. But there’s something I have to tell you. After I saw that film last night I thought about it a lot. That film disturbed me more than seeing Gary Gilmore die. There’s no reason a civilized society should have a place like that. It’s just not right. It’s not.”

### COMING UP IN THE FALL 2013 BUFFALO FILM SEMINARS XXVII:

- **October 29** Jim Jarmusch *Dead Man* 1995
- **November 5** Pedro Almodóvar *Talk to Her* 2002
- **November 12** Charlie Kaufman *Synecdoche, New York* 2008
- **November 19** Wim Wenders *Pina* 2011
- **November 26** Baz Luhrmann *The Great Gatsby* 2013

The online PDF files of these handouts have color images

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...for the series schedule, annotations, links and updates: [http://buffalofilmseminars.com](http://buffalofilmseminars.com)

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