

English 693

Katy Ryan, ENGL 693, Fall 2007

ENG 693B:

**Twentieth-century and Contemporary US American Prison Literature:
Imprisonment and Resistance**

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Office Hours: Thurs 9:00-11:00AM

- Just as slavery was the central and distinguishing feature of American society before the Civil War, the modern prison system, which was largely an American innovation, has ever since the Civil War been evolving into a central institution of contemporary America. Indeed, today the prison-industrial complex is a feature that distinguishes American society from all other societies in the twenty-first century. So if we teach modern American literature without reference to the American prison and its literature, we are behaving like those who failed to see, hear, or speak about slavery and its literature.
- H. Bruce Franklin

The dramatic number of people locked up in American prisons in the last quarter of the 20th-century has been widely documented. By 2000, the rate of incarceration surpassed 700 per 100,000 people, a percentage, as Loïc Wacquant notes, "about 40 per cent higher than South Africa's at the height of the armed struggle against apartheid." In our state of West Virginia, the number of people imprisoned since 1997 has increased 95%. For some, the imprisonment of two million people and the additional five million living under some other form of state surveillance suggests a reprehensible method of population control and repression, one that disproportionately impacts poor people and Black, Hispanic, and Native Americans. For others, the increase in the prison population and surveillance mechanisms is a reasonable response to criminal behavior, a sign that the state is tough on crime and willing to use its resources to punish offenders.

This course is rooted in prison studies, an interdisciplinary approach to understanding the complex history and cultural function of prisons. Like Black Studies and Women's Studies, prison

studies emerges from specific social crises and a determination to make academic courses relevant to struggles for justice. We will confront fundamental questions about literary and cultural work, such as, What constitutes the field of prison literature, and why? What does art have to do with prisons? How should prison literature be situated within the larger field of American literature? Has literature by or about prisoners played a role in public policy decisions, changes in prison administration, or judicial processes? Why have criminal investigations, interrogations, and trials become such a popular feature of American entertainment?

As we read literary texts, we will also draw from history, philosophy, sociology, sexuality studies, narrative theories, and critical race theories to help us contextualize and analyze multiple operations of power. In Part One, we will study the history of prisons and prison writing by reading works by, among others, Michel Foucault, David Oshinsky, H. Bruce Franklin, and Joy James. In Part Two, we will turn to the dominant genre in prison literature, autobiography. These works testify to personal transformations inside and outside prison walls. The literary works in Part Three will prompt us to examine the specific complications of imprisoned sexual and gendered bodies. We will also discuss the borders of prison culture: What practices, ideologies, personal dynamics are similar inside and out? What "prisons" exist in the "free" world? In Part Four, we will study capital punishment, reading three plays, a novel, and essays written in support and against state killing. In each section, we will attend to recurring narrative, theoretical, and dramatic concerns, such as the treatment of time and space; trauma, crime, punishment; faith and religion; class, race, and gender. We will conclude the semester with a brief section on war and torture "revelations," or what has been called "the prison nation abroad."

I want to say a word about the politics of this course. I am not neutral about our current prison system nor about the death penalty. I oppose the death penalty in all cases, and I believe that the prison system creates indefensible suffering for many families and individuals. Most prisoners in the US are serving time for nonviolent drug-related offenses. (Some people believe that all drug offenses are violent, but I am using the legal definition of "nonviolent" here.) The perception that most prisoners are dangerous people who are a threat to public safety is, in my estimation, a false one. I also know that the suffering of murder and rape victims, and the agony experienced by their family and friends, is almost unspeakable. To focus on the abuses of the state with regard to prisoners does not require that we ignore or diminish the consequences of violent crimes. Indeed, there is a model for this kind of thinking in the contemporary anti-death penalty movement, which brings together prisoners' and victims' advocates, family members of people who have been executed by the state and family members of people who have been

murdered.

My sense that basic human rights are being routinely violated in American prisons will, I suspect, be clear to you. I am not, however, interested in a one-sided, static, and settled conversation. I am going to work hard to create a vital dialogue about difficult personal, social, and political questions, and to craft a scholarly environment in which we can respectfully challenge one another as well as our reading materials. The study of literature teaches us to attend to the complexity of situations. Imprisonment is complex. So is liberation. We need to start reading.

Required Books

David Oshinsky, "*Worse Than Slavery: Parchman Farm and the Ordeal of Jim Crow Justice* (1996)

Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (trans. 1977)

Robert E. Burns, *I am a Fugitive from a Georgia Chain Gang!* (1932)

Malcolm X, *Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1965)

Assata Shakur, *Assata* (1987)

Piri Thomas, *Down These Mean Streets* (1967)

Malcolm Braly, *On the Yard* (1967)

Marsha Norman, *Getting Out* (1978; first performed 1977)

Sophie Treadwell, *Machinal* (1993; first performed 1931)

Jessica Blank and Eric Jensen, *The Exonerated* (2004; first performed 2002)

Richard Wright, *Native Son* (1940; unabridged edition 1991)

Requirements

Reader Responses

On our listserve, everyone will post at least five responses (approximately 500-750 words) to our readings. You should choose one idea, question, image, or scene from our weekly readings to focus on. Be sure to include quotations in your analysis. Pace your responses throughout the semester and try to post by at least 4PM on Sunday, so we all have a chance to read the responses before we meet. Please bring to class a single-spaced, hard copy for me. Our listserve can also serve for follow-up discussions and announcements.

One of these responses can be a creative response to our readings. That is, you might compose a letter to an author or a character, examining some question that you have. Or you might

compose a scene that takes place before or after a moment in a literary text—a scene that conveys your understanding of the original text. Any creative, engaged, thoughtful writing is welcome.

Essays

You will compose two essays (10-12 pages) in which you pursue a theoretical, historical, philosophical, and/or critical literary question. For the first essay, I will collect annotated bibliographies (approx. 10 sources) and abstracts about two weeks before the due date. For the second essay, I will again collect abstracts and proposals, but we will also have a full draft exchange. (I have set aside class time for writing workshops for both assignments.) I will invite each of you to meet with me in a conference to discuss your ideas. Anyone who would like in the second assignment to follow up on the first essay and compose a 20-25 page essay is welcome to do so.

In order to compile a useful **annotated bibliography**, you will need to skim a number of articles and books, and glean the main subject, approach, range and depth of the research. Each entry should be about 150 words. Use MLA style for the citation. See this website for more information on abstracts and annotated bibliographies. <http://www.library.cornell.edu/olinuris/ref/research/skill28.htm>

Resident Expert

Everyone will have a chance to be a Resident Expert for one class period. On your assigned day, you will have the option of either a) guiding the first thirty minutes of our discussion, or b) offering a ten-minute presentation at the beginning of class. In either case, you will create an annotated bibliography (approx. 8 - 10 sources) that focuses on a specific aspect of our reading for that week. Please bring copies to class for everyone. In your presentation, you should focus on one aspect of our readings. Do not feel like you need to cover everything. Also, do not simply take us through the annotated bibliography, but rather draw from your research in creative ways to launch our discussion. Email and let me know which option you will be pursuing at least two days before we meet.

Grade Breakdown

Two Essays (10 - 12 pp)	60%
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Five Responses (500 - 750 words)	20%
Participation	10%
Resident Expert	10%

Recommended Reading

Autobiographies / Letters

Jack Henry Abbot, *In the Belly of the Beast: Letters from Prison*
 ashe bandele, *the prisoner's wife*
 Alexander Berkman, *Prison Memoirs of an Anarchist*
 Daniel Berrigan, *From Yale to Jail*
 Ted Conover, *Newjack: Guarding Sing Sing*
 Barbara Deming, *Prison Walls Could Not Hold*
 Renaldo Hudson, et. al., *Lockdown Prison Heart*
 George Jackson, *Soledad, Brother: Prison Letters of George Jackson*
 Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from Prison Writings (1910-1920)* (Italy)
 Martin Luther King, Jr. "Letter from Birmingham Jail"
 Jarvis Jay Masters, *Finding Freedom*
 Debbie Morris, *Forgiving the Dead Man Walking*
 Huey Newton, *Revolutionary Suicide*
 Haywood Patterson and Earl Conrad, *Scottsboro Boy*
 Leonard Peltier, *Prison Writings: My Life is My Sun Dance*
 Nawal Sadawi, et. al., *Memoirs from the Women's Prison* (Egypt)
 J. Jerry Sylvia, *Pardon My Convicts: Memoirs of a Prison Warden*
 Henry David Thoreau, "On Civil Disobedience"
 John Wideman, *Brothers and Keepers*

Fiction

Sherman Alexie, "The Sin Eaters"
 James Baldwin, *If Beale Street Could Talk*, *Giovanni's Room*, and "Sonny's Blues"
 John Cheever, *Falconer*
 Robert Coover, *A Public Burning*
 Dawson Fielding, *No Man's Land* [out of print]
 Bessie Head, "The Prisoner Who Wore Glasses"
 Robert Heinlein, *The Moon is a Harsh Mistress*
 Chester Himes, *Yesterday Will Make You Cry*
 Victor Hugo, *The Last Days of a Condemned Man* and *Les Miserables* (France)
 Gayl Jones, *Eva's Man*
 Nawal Sadawi, *Woman at Point Zero* (Egypt)
 Alexandre Solzhenitsyn, *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovitch* and *The Gulag Archipelago*, 1918-1956. (Russia)

Documentary Fiction

Norman Mailer, *Executioner's Song* and *Armies of the Night*
 Truman Capote, *In Cold Blood*

Drama / Performance

Miguel Piñero, *Short Eyes*
 Manuel Puig, *Kiss of the Spiderwoman*
 Jean Trounstein, *Shakespeare Behind Bars: Power of Drama in a Woman's Prison*
 John Wexley, *The Last Mile* (out of print)
 William Alexander, "Inside Out: From Inside Prison Out to Youth." *Drama Review* 40.4 (1996): 85-93.

Tim Mitchell, "Notes from Inside: Forum Theatre in Maximum Security." *Theatre* 31.3 (2001).

Poetry

Etheridge Knight, *The Essential Etheridge Knight*

Wole Soyinka, *Shuttle in the Crypt*

See *Doing Time* and *Prison Writing*

Literary Anthologies

Bell Gale Chevigny, ed. *Doing Time: 25 Years of Prison Writing*

H. Bruce Franklin, ed. *Prison Writing in 20th-century America*

Histories and Literary / Cultural Criticism

John Bender, *Imagining the Penitentiary: Fiction and Architecture of Mind in Eighteenth- Century England*

Jeremy Bentham, *Panopticon, Letters; Postscript to the Panopticon*

Daniel Burton-Rose, *The Ceiling of America*

Don Carter, *Scottsboro: Tragedy of the American South*

Alan Elsner, *Gates of Injustice*

Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth and Black Skins, White Masks*

H. Bruce Franklin, *Prison Literature in America*

David Garland, *Culture of Control*

Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from Prison Writings (1910-1920)*

Joseph Hallinan, *Going Up the River: Travels in a Prison Nation*

Joy James, ed. *The New Abolitionists: (Neo)Slave Narratives and Contemporary Prison Writings*

---. *Warfare in the American Homeland: Policing and Prison in a Penal Democracy*

Miller, D. Quentin, ed. *Prose and Cons: Essays on Prison Literature in the United States*

Miller, Jerome. *Search and Destroy: African American Males in the Criminal Justice System*

Christian Parenti, *Lockdown America*

On Capital Punishment

Mumia Abu-Jamal, *Live from Death Row*

Hugo Adam Bedau, *Killing as Punishment: Reflections on the Death Penalty in America*

Albert Camus, *Neither an Executioner nor a Victim*

Albert Camus, "Reflections on the Guillotine"

Andrew Coyle, ed. *Capitalist Punishment*

David Protess and Robert Warren, *A Promise of Justice: the 14-Year Fight to Save Four Innocent Men*

David Von Ehle, *Among the Lowest of the Dead: The Culture of Death Row*

Austin Sarat, *When the State Kills: Capital Punishment and the American Condition*

Austin Sarat and Christian Boulanger, *The Cultural Lives of Capital Punishment*

Barry Scheck, Peter Neufeld, and Jim Dwyer. *Actual Innocence*

Films

Cool Hand Luke, Dir. Stuart Rosenberg, 1967

Dancer in the Dark, Dir. Lars Von Trier, 2000

Dead Man Walking, Dir. Tim Robbins, 1995

I Am A Fugitive from a Georgia Chain Gang! Dir. Mervyn LeRoy, 1932

Kiss of the Spiderwoman, Dir. Hector Babenco 1985

The Last Mile, Dir. Sam Bischoff, 1932

Pinero, Dir. Leon Ishaso, 2001

Romero, Dir. John Duigan, 1989

Shawshank Redemption, Dir. Frank Darabont, 1994

Talk to Me, Dir. Kasi Lemmons, 2007

Weeds, Dir. John Hancock, 1987

Zoot Suit, Dir. Luis Valdez, 1981

Documentaries

Big House--Alderson, PBS, 1998

Hard Road Home, Dir. Macky Alston, 2007 (<http://www.hardroadhome.org/>)

Incident at Ogala, Dir. Michael Apted, 1992

Scottsboro: An American Tragedy, Dir. Barak Goodman, 2000

Thin Blue Line, Dir. Errol Morris, 1988

Execution of Wanda Jean Allen, Dir. Liz Garbus, 2002

Shielded Brutality (spokefilms.com) 2007

Selected Websites

General Prison Information

1) <http://www.current.tv/make/vc2/sot> "A Nation Under Guard"

Death Penalty & Victims' Information

2) <http://www.mvfr.org> Murder Victims' Families for Reconciliation

3) <http://www.deathpenaltyinfo.org/> Death Penalty Information Center

4) <http://www.danielfaulkner.com/> Justice for Daniel Faulkner

5) <http://www.indcjournal.com/archives/000420.php> INDC Journal: National Police Week

6) <http://www.geocities.com/Tokyo/Pagoda/7111/assata.html> Written by Assata Shakur

Human Rights & Prison News

7) <http://www.un.org/Overview/rights.html> Universal Declaration of Human Rights

8) <http://www.italnet.nd.edu/gramsci/> International Gramsci Society

9) <http://www.eji.org> Equal Justice Initiative of Alabama

10) <http://www.schr.org> Southern Center for Human Rights

11) <http://www.prisonlegalnews.org> Monthly newspaper on legal issues

12) <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/> US Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics

Literature and Creative Arts

13) <http://newark.rutgers.edu/~hbf/> H. Bruce Franklin's homepage at Rutgers

14) <http://andromeda.rutgers.edu/~hbf/himes.html> "Portrait of the Artist as a Young Convict" by H. Bruce Franklin (on Chester Himes)

15) <http://anothercupdevelopment.org/resources> Center for Urban Pedagogy

16) <http://www.lsa.umich.edu/english/pcap/> UMich Prison Creative Arts Program

17) <http://www.15yearstolife.com/art1.htm> Anthony Papa's art and activism

18) <http://www.artsincriminaljustice.org> Arts in Criminal Justice National Conference

19) <http://www.pen.org/prison/prisonawards.html> PEN American Center

20) <http://www.politicalnovel.org> Politics and the Novel

E-Reserve Access

Username: ryan2

Password: 436

Schedule

August 20: Introductions

1. Histories and Theories of Prison/Writing

August 27

David Oshinsky, " 'Worse than Slavery,' " Prologue, Chapters 1, 2, 3, 6, 7, 9, Epilogue

H. Bruce Franklin, *Prison Writing in 20th-C. America*. Introduction, 1-18. [[e-reserve](#)]

Autobiography of an Imprisoned Peon in *Prison Writing*, 21-29. [\[e-reserve\]](#)

Songs of the Prison Plantation in *Prison Writing*, 29-34. [\[e-reserve\]](#)

September 3

No class-Labor Day

September 10

Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 1-69, 195-228; 257-308

Lucia Zedner, "Wayward Sisters: The Prison for Women." *Oxford History of the Prison*, 295-324. [\[e-reserve\]](#)

Joy James, Chapter One: "Erasing the Spectacle of Racialized State Violence" in *Resisting State Violence* [\[handout\]](#)

Alford, C. Fred. "What would it matter if everything Foucault said about the prison were wrong: Discipline and Punish after twenty years." *Theory and Society* 29 (2000): 125-146. [\[JSTOR\]](#)

2. "Fugitive Justice": Liberation Inside Out

September 17

Kate Richards O'Hare, from *Crime and Criminals in Prison Writing*, 74-89. [\[e-reserve\]](#)

Robert Burns, *I Am A Fugitive from a Georgia Chain Gang!*

Monika Fludernik, "Carceral Topography: Spatiality, Liminality, and Corporality in the Literary Prison." *Textual Practice* 13.1 (1999). [\[handout\]](#)

September 24

Malcolm X, *Autobiography of Malcolm X*

Paul St. John, "Behind the Mirror's Face" in *Doing Time* [\[e-reserve\]](#)

Rodriguez, Dylan. "Against the Discipline of 'Prison Writing': Toward a Theoretical Conception of Contemporary Radical Prison Praxis." *Genre* 35.3/4 (2002): 407-428. [\[e-reserve\]](#)

Recommended:

Michael García-Hames. *Introduction Fugitive Thought: Prison Movements, Race, and the Meaning of Justice*. [\[handout\]](#)

October 1

Assata Shakur, *Assata*

Diane Hamill Metzger, "The Manipulation Game: Doing Life in Pennsylvania" in *Doing Time* [[e-reserve](#)]

<http://www.indcjournal.com/archives/000420.php> INDC Journal: National Police Week

<http://www.geocities.com/Tokyo/Pagoda/7111/assata.htm> Written by Assata Shakur

Judith Scheffler, "Imprisoned Mothers and Sisters: Dealing with Loss through Writing and Solidarity," in *Prose and Cons*, 111-128. [[handout](#)]

Recommended:

Interview with Assata Shakur in *Race and Class*

Due Friday, October 5 by 3PM: Annotated Bibliography and Abstract for First Essay

October 8

Writing Workshop

George Jackson, excerpts from *Soledad, Brother* and *Blood in my Eye*

Recommended:

from Leonard Peltier, *Prison Writings: My Life is My Sun Dance* [[handout](#)]

Laura Doyle, "Bodies Inside/Out: A Phenomenology of the Terrorized Body in Prison." *Bodies of Resistance: New Phenomenologies of Politics, Agency and Culture*. [[handout](#)]

3. Borders of Culture, History, and Sexuality

October 15 First Papers Due

<http://www.current.tv/make/vc2/sot> "A Nation Under Guard" [[in-class](#)]

Piri Thomas, *Down These Mean Streets*

Jimmy Santiago Baca, "Coming into Language." *Doing Time*. 100-106 [[handout](#)]

October 22

Malcolm Braly, *On the Yard*

Regina G. Kunzel, "Situating Sex: Prison Sexual Culture in the Mid-Twentieth-Century United States." *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 8.3 (2002): 253-270. [Project MUSE]

Recommended for those going to Moundsville:

Stan Bumgardner and Christine Kreiser, "'Thy Brother's Blood': Capital Punishment in West Virginia." *West Virginia Historical Society Quarterly* (March 1996). www.wvculture.org/history/wvhs941.html

Saturday, October 27: Optional Trip to Moundsville

October 29

Marsha Norman, *Getting Out*

Patricia McConnel, "Sing Soft, Sing Loud" and "Afterword" from *Sing Soft, Sing Loud* [[e-reserve](#)]

Angela Davis, Chapter 4: "How Gender Structures the Prison System" in *Are Prisons Obsolete* [[e-reserve](#)]

Recommended:

Beth E. Richie, "The Social Impact of Mass Incarceration on Women." *Invisible Punishment* 136-149. [[e-reserve](#)]

Medea Chesney-Lind, "Imprisoning Women: The Unintended Victims of Mass Imprisonment." *Invisible Punishment* 79-94. [[e-reserve](#)]

Rachel Roth, "Searching for the State: Who Governs Prisoners' Reproductive Rights?" *Social Politics* 11.3 (2004): 411-438. [Project Muse]

4. The Spectacle of Death

November 5 PBS Documentary, *Scottsboro: An American Tragedy* [viewing on Sunday 7PM in the library]

Langston Hughes, *Scottsboro Limited* [[handout](#)]

Lewis Lawes, Introduction to *The Last Mile* [[handout](#)]

Sophie Treadwell, *Machinal*

Jessie Ramey, "The Bloody Blonde and the Marble Woman: Gender and Power in the Case of Ruth Snyder." *Journal of Social History* 37.3 (2004): 625-650. [Project Muse]

Dwight Conquergood. "Lethal Theatre: Performance, Punishment, and the Death Penalty." *Theatre Journal* 54.3 (2002): 339-367. [Project Muse]

November 12

Jessica Blank and Eric Jensen, *The Exonerated*

Selections from *Debating the Death Penalty*, eds. Hugo Bedau and Paul Cassell:

Alex Kozinski, "Tinkering with Death"

Hugo Bedau, "An Abolitionist's Survey of the Death Penalty in America Today"

Paul G. Cassell, "In Defense of the Death Penalty"

George Ryan, "I Must Act" [\[handout\]](#)

Recommended:

Jane Mayer, "Comeback," *New Yorker* (26 Mar. 2007)

David R. Dow and Alan Hirsch, "Needle in a Haystack: Is Innocence the best argument for ending the death penalty?" *Texas Observer* (23 Feb. 2007): 12+. [\[handout\]](#)

Sr. Helen Prejean, "Death in Texas," *New York Review of Books* (13 Jan. 2005).

[[_www.nybooks.com/articles/17670_](http://www.nybooks.com/articles/17670_)]

THANKSGIVING BREAK

November 26

Richard Wright, *Native Son*

William J. Maxwell, Chapter 6: "Native Sons Divorce: A Conclusion" in *New Negro, Old Left: African American Writing and Communism Between the Wars*. [\[handout\]](#)

Due Friday, November 30 by 3PM: Complete Draft of Essay

War-Time "Revelations"

December 3

Writing Workshop

William F. Pinar, "Cultures of Torture," *Warfare in the American Homeland*, 290-304 [\[handout\]](#)

Benjamin Whitmer. " 'Torture Chambers and Rape Rooms': What Abu Ghraib Can Tell Us about the American Carceral System." *New Centennial Review* 6.1 (2006): 171-194. [Project MUSE]

Michelle Brown. " 'Setting the Conditions' for Abu Ghraib: The Prison Nation Abroad." *American Quarterly* 57.3 (2005). [Project MUSE]

Eliza Griswold. "American Gulag: Prisoners' Tales from the War on Terror." *Harper's* (Jan. 2006). [\[handout\]](#)

Final Essays Due on Monday, December 10 by 3PM