ENGL 631: STUDIES IN NONFICTION PROSE

Prison Autobiographies, or
Life-Writing from the Concrete Tomb

Language gave me a way to keep the chaos of prison at bay and prevent it from devouring me.

Jimmy Santiago Baca

Hopelessness is the enemy of justice.

Bryan Stevenson

Katy Ryan, Associate Professor of English
Colson 221 / Office Hours: Wed 9-11:00 and by appointment
kohearnr@mail.wvu.edu

Course Description
By the beginning of the twenty-first century, the United States was the most incarcerated country in the world. How did this happen, and what does literature teach us about the modern prison?

Twentieth-century and contemporary autobiographies by imprisoned and formerly imprisoned people provide imaginative access to a highly controlled and locked down space. From conversion narratives to oral histories to political autobiographies, these life-writings offer critiques of policing and the criminal justice system, analyze gendered and racialized carceral environments, testify to internal and communal resources for survival and transformation, and reflect on the nature of time and isolation.

Our work will involve synthesizing the knowledge presented in imprisonment literature and arriving at an understanding of the social and political function of prisons today. The idea behind the nineteenth penitentiary was this: Isolated in a cell, chastened by silence, disciplined by labor, the imprisoned subject would reflect and become penitent, journey through death to rejoin the human family, reborn, rehabilitated. It pretty much never worked that way. (According to Foucault, it was never meant to work that way.)

For those interested, there will be an opportunity to visit the Appalachian Prison Book Project, a local nonprofit that sends free books to imprisoned people in six states and facilitates book clubs inside a federal prison. You will also be invited to participate in a Service-Learning Weekend with students from James Madison University March 31-April 2.

Contents of Syllabus
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1. **Course Goals**
   - To read 20th-century and contemporary prison autobiographies
   - To study the history and politics of the modern prison in the United States
   - To understand the racial dimensions of the criminal justice system
   - To create a supportive intellectual and creative community
   - To reflect on, and contribute to, discussions about the humanities in public life

2. **Learning Outcomes**
   By the end of the semester, students should be able to do the following:
   - Contribute to scholarly discussions about prison autobiographies
   - Identify patterns and tropes in this literature
   - Define the carceral state and the prison industrial complex
   - Compose a strong analytical research essay that responds to literature
   - Respond thoughtfully to the ideas of others
   - Present ideas clearly and effectively in writing and speech

3. **Inclusivity Statement**
   The West Virginia University community is committed to creating and fostering a positive learning and working environment based on open communication, mutual respect, and inclusion.

   If you are a person with a disability and anticipate needing any type of accommodation in order to participate in this class, please advise me and make appropriate arrangements with the Office of Accessibility Services. Accessibility Services is located in Suite 250 at 1085 Van Voorhis Rd (beside Applebee’s and across from the Mountaineer Station transportation center). 304-293-6700; access2@mail.wvu.edu; http://accessibilityservices.wvu.edu/

4. **Required Texts**
   - Piri Thomas, *Down These Mean Streets* (1967)

**Handouts**
   - Jack London, “‘Pinched’: A Prison Experience” and “The Pen”
   - Agnes Smedley, “Cell Mates” and Kate Richards O’Hare, from *Crime and Criminals*
   - Chester Himes, “To What Red Hell”
   - Willie Francis, “My Trip to the Chair”
   - Poems by Lewis, McDonough, Ruzas, Masters; Song by Earle
   - Jack Abbott and Norman Mailer, from *In the Belly of the Beast: Letters from Prison*
   - Patricia McConnell, “Sing Soft, Sing Loud”
   - Dwayne Betts, “Only Once I Considered Suicide”
   - Poems by Etheridge Knight
Readings Available on ECampus

Mumia Abu-Jamal, excerpts from *Live from Death Row* (xv-23)
Jimmy Santiago Baca, “Coming Into Language,” *Doing Time*
Douglas Blackmon, excerpt from *Slavery By Another Name* (intro + chapter xv + epilogue)
Deborah Denno, “When Willie Francis Died: The ‘Disturbing’ Story Behind One of the Eighth Amendment’s Most Enduring Standards of Risk,” *Death Penalty Stories*
Bruce H. Franklin, Introduction to *Prison Writing in 20th-Century America*. Foreword by Tom Wicker.
Michel Foucault, excerpt from *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*
David Garland, excerpt from *The Peculiar Institution* (preface + intro)
Che Gossett, “Abolitionist Imaginings.” Interview with Bo Brown, Reina Gossett, and Dylan Rodriguez in *Captive Genders*
Nancy Kurshan, “Women and Imprisonment in the US”
Kate Richards O’Hare, *Crime and Criminals, Prison Writing*
Dylan Rodriguez, excerpt from *Forced Passages*
Agnes Smedley, “Cell Mates,” *Prison Writing*
Caleb Smith, excerpt from *Prison and the American Imagination*
Paul St. John, “Behind the Mirror” from Bell Chevigny, ed., *Doing Time: 25 Years of Prison Writing*
Megan Sweeney, *Reading Is My Window* (chapter one)

5. Grading Distribution

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<td>A) Participation</td>
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<td>B) Six Reader Responses (paced)</td>
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<td>C) Annotated Bibliography</td>
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<td>D) 12-page Research Essay</td>
<td>30</td>
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<td>E) Symposium Presentation</td>
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6. Requirements

A) Participation and One Big Question (15 points)

The Practice
Participation involves active discussion in class. If you have any concerns about talking in class, please visit me in my office early in the semester. Participation will also include posting and commenting on our course blog.
Civility
I welcome lively discussion and dissent, and set a high bar for thoughtful and civil exchange. Our primary readings offer perspectives on incarceration from those who have survived it, and not survived it. Feel free to bring materials and ideas to class that challenge these perspectives.

A Big Question
Everyone will have a chance to prepare a big question for one class discussion. By this, I mean the kind of question that occurs only after you have done the reading and given it serious thought. Pull back and see if you can offer us a new and broad perspective. Your question should not be easily answered, nor should there be necessarily a single answer.

I will ask you to write your question on the board for us ponder as we have our discussion. At some point, we will turn directly to your question.

B) Reader Responses (30 points)
You will compose six 500-word reader responses. Please pace these responses throughout the semester. You can focus on whatever you would like in the primary or secondary literature. The best responses typically respond to a specific question or idea and are anchored in the language of literary, historical, or theoretical works. Be sure to quote directly from the texts.

Once during the semester, you have the option to write a retrospective response. This means that you can write a response after the class has discussed a particular work. Retrospective responses must be turned in within 2 weeks of the reading.

You also have the option to write one creative response. With the creative option, you could imagine an additional scene, write a letter to a character or author, create a dialogue between characters from different works, or something else entirely. The goal is to offer insight into the original work through a creative engagement.

One last option! For those who are interested in writing an abstract for the final paper, you can use one of your responses for this purpose.

***Please upload reader responses to ECampus / Responses by Monday 9:00 PM.

C) Annotated Bibliography (10 points)
To prepare for the final essay, you will compile an annotated bibliography with a minimum of 7 scholarly sources. Each notation should be approximately 250-300 words. Sources should be varied (books, chapters, journal articles).

D) 12-page Research Essay (30 points)
See separate handout.

E) Symposium Presentation (15 points)
At the end of the semester, we will hold a one-day symposium to showcase your work. This will be an opportunity to present your ideas and research to an interested and supportive public.
7. **Additional Resources**

**AUTOBIOGRAPHIES**
Robert Burns, *I am a Fugitive from a Georgia Chain Gang!*
Eldridge Cleaver, *Soul on Ice*
Angela Davis, *An Autobiography*
Earl Dudding, *Trail of the Dead Years*
Damien Echols, *Life After Death*
Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, *My Life as a Political Prisoner*
Piper Kerman, *Orange Is the New Black*
Donald Lowrie, *My Life In Prison*
Jarvis Jay Masters, *That Bird Has My Wings*
Haywood Patterson and Earl Conrad, *Scottsboro Boy*
Iceberg Slim, *The Naked Soul*
Stanley Tookie Williams, *Blue Redemption*

**ANTHOLOGIES**
Jean Casella, James Ridgeway, Sarah Shourd, eds. *Hell is a Very Small Place: Voices from Solitary Confinement*
Siobhan Dowd, ed. *This Prison Where I Live: PEN Anthology*
Marc Falkoff, ed. *Poems from Guantánamo: The Detainees Speak*
Wally Lamb, ed. *Couldn’t Keep It To Myself*

**PRISON PUBLICATIONS**
* Fortune News (Fortune Society)*
* Prison Legal News [https://www.prisonlegalnews.org/](https://www.prisonlegalnews.org/)*

**LEGAL, HISTORICAL, AND CULTURAL STUDIES SELECTIONS**
Joanne Braxton, *Black Women Writing Autobiography: A Tradition within a Tradition*
Angela Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?*
Colin Dayan, *The Story of Cruel and Unusual*
Robert Ferguson, *Inferno: An Anatomy of American Punishment*
Bruce Franklin, *Prison Literature in America: The Victim as Criminal and Artist*
David Garland, *Culture of Control: Crime and Social Order in Contemporary Society*
Ruth Gilmore, *The Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis and Opposition in Globalizing California*
Lisa Guenther, *Solitary Confinement: Social Death and its Afterlives*
Barbara Harlow, *Barred: Women, Writing and Political Detention*
Joseph T. Hallinan, *Going Up the River: Travels in a Prison Nation*
Joy James, *Imprisoned Intellectuals*
Regina Kunzel, *Criminal Intimacy*
Marc Mauer and Meda Chesney-Lind, eds., *Invisible Punishment: The Collateral Consequences of Mass Imprisonment*
Quentin Miller, ed. *Prose and Cons: Essays on Prison Literature*
James Morris, *Jailhouse Journalism*
Naomi Murakawa, *The First Civil Right: How Liberals Built Prison America*
Martha Nussbaum, *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*
David M. Oshinsky, "Worse Than Slavery": *Parchman Farm and the Ordeal of Jim Crow Justice*
Margo V. Perkins, *Autobiography as Activism: three Black Women of the Sixties*
Katy Ryan, ed. *Demands of the Dead: Executions, Storytelling, and Activism in the United States*
Bryan Stevenson, *Just Mercy*
Bruce Western, *Punishment and Inequality in America*

**FILMS**
*I Am A Fugitive from a Georgia Chain Gang!* Dir. Mervyn LeRoy, 1932
*The Last Mile*, Dir. Sam Bischoff, 1932
*Zoot Suit*, Dir. Luis Valdez, 1981
*Kiss of the Spiderwoman*, Dir. Hector Babenco 1985
*Weeds*, Dir. John Hancock, 1987
*Shawshank Redemption*, Dir. Frank Darabont, 1994
*Murder in the First*, Dir. Marc Rocco, 1995
*Dead Man Walking*, Dir. Tim Robbins, 1995
*Sleepers*, Dir. Barry Levinson, 1996
*Dancer in the Dark*, Dir. Lars Von Trier, 2000
*Piñero*, Dir. Leon Ishaso, 2001
*Talk to Me*, Dir. Kasi Lemmons, 2007

**DOCUMENTARY FILMS**
13th, Dir. Ava DuVernay, 2016
*The House I Live In*, Dir. Eugene Jarecki, 2012
*Big House—Alderson*, PBS, 1998
*Incident at Oglala*, Dir. Michael Apted, 1992
*Thin Blue Line*, Dir. Errol Morris, 1988
*Execution of Wanda Jean Allen*, Dir. Liz Garbus, 2002
*Shielded Brutality* (spokefilms.com), 2007
*Up the Ridge*, dirs. Amelia Kirby and Nick Szuberia
*Slavery By Another Name* [http://video.pbs.org/video/2176766758/](http://video.pbs.org/video/2176766758/)

**WEBSITES/VIDEOS**

**Informational**
Marshall Project [https://www.themarshallproject.org/#.iEMlMLRae](https://www.themarshallproject.org/#.iEMlMLRae)
Sentencing Project Interactive Map [http://www.sentencingproject.org/map/map.cfm#map](http://www.sentencingproject.org/map/map.cfm#map)
ACLU Infographic on mass incarceration
Solitary Watch
http://www.salon.com/2013/05/07/battling_censorship_behind_bars_partner/
Stanford Experiment: http://zimbardo.socialpsychology.org/
Humanities Action Lab Global Dialogues on Incarceration
http://humanitiesactionlab.org/globaldialogues/incarceration/

On Education and Re-Entry
All of Us or None: http://www.allofusornone.org/newsite/about_us
Inside Out Center http://www.insideoutcenter.org/
Education Justice Project http://www.educationjustice.net/home/
Alabama Prison Creative Arts + Education http://apaep.auburn.edu/
Prison Studies Project http://prisonstudiesproject.org/about/
Arizona State University Prison English http://english.clas.asu.edu/prisonenglish
Chris Hedges, “The Play's the Thing” http://billmoyers.com/2013/12/18/the-play's-the-thing/
New Yorker article http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/12/12/the-ex-con-scholars-of-berkeley

Prison English News
Presentation by Arthur Longworth on LWOP:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yC8wGu7uCMk&index=7&list=PLki4QkQOqBsGP3ofy8YDjok2K9LMmUVXy
Appalachian Prison Book Project http://aprilprisonbookproject.wordpress.com/
**SCHEDULE**

❖ We may, for sanity’s sake, need to cut back on some of the required readings.
❖ Everyone can take a pass on the reading for one week. Let me know beforehand, and please still come to class that day.

Jan 10

What it might help me to know. Introductions.
Syllabus. Overview. Sign Up for Big Question Day
Clips from *Slavery By Another Name* (1-17.00; 59:25-1:09:35)

**LIBERATION, WITH ONE EXCEPTION**

Jan 17

Anonymous, “Autobiography of an Imprisoned Peon” (1903)
[ECampus—see “Wicker, Franklin, and Autobiography”]

Jack London, “‘Pinched’: A Prison Experience” “Pen” (1894)
http://carl-bell.baylor.edu/jl/Pinched.html

Pictures of Erie PA Penitentiary
http://www.wnyheritagepress.org/photos_week_2012/jack_londen_pen/jack_london_pen.htm


Douglas Blackmon, excerpt from *Slavery By Another Name* – Introduction, Chapter XV, and Epilogue [ECampus]

Recommended:
*Article on Austin Reed’s The Life and Adventures of a Haunted Convict, or the Inmate of a Gloomy Prison*  

Jan 24

Agnes Smedley, "Cell Mates" (1920) [handout/ECampus]

Kate Richards O’Hare, from *Crime and Criminals* (1923) [handout/ECampus]

Chester Himes, “To What Red Hell” (1934) [handout]

Oscar Wilde, “Ballad of Reading Gaol” (1898) [ECampus]

H. Bruce Franklin, Introduction to *Prison Writing in 20th-Century America*
Tom Wicker, Foreword to *Prison Writing* [Ecampus—See "Wicker, Franklin, and Autobiography"]

Recent Prison Strikes:

Recommended:


**STATE KILLING**

Jan 31

Willie Francis, “My Trip to the Chair” [handout/ECampus]

Poems by Lewis, McDonough, Ruzas, Masters; Song by Earle [handout]

Mumia Abu-Jamal, from *Live from Death Row* [ECampus]

David Garland, Prologue and Introduction to *Peculiar Institution* [ECampus]

Commencement address:

“To Murder Victims’ Families Executing Killers is Justice”


In Class: *Witness to an Execution*  
[http://www.soundportraits.org/on-air/witness_to_an_execution/](http://www.soundportraits.org/on-air/witness_to_an_execution/)

Recommended:  
“Lawsuit Challenging Pennsylvania’s ‘Mumia’s Gag Order’”  

“PA is ordered to provide Hepatitis C Drugs to Inmate”  

Deborah W. Denno, “When Willie Francis Died . . .” [Ecampus]
Eric Jensen and Jessica Blank, *The Exonerated* (documentary play)

Bob Curley, father of a child who was murdered, discusses changing view of death penalty.  
http://www.necn.com/video/#!/news/politics/Life-Sentence-Vs--Death-Penalty-for-Tsarnaev/299625511

Anthony Ray Hinton on how he got through 30 years on death row as an innocent man.  
http://www.democracynow.org/2015/4/6/they_couldn_t_take_my_soul

http://www.columbiatribune.com/opinion/oped/commute-all-death-sentences/article_045535e0-f4a0-59d4-90bb-405fc0ceaaaa.html

**CONVERSIONS/TRANSFORMATIONS/LIBERATING WORDS**

**Feb 7**


Recommended:  
Digital Scholarship:  
http://www.brothermalcolm.net/

David Remnick in *New Yorker*:  
http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2011/04/25/this-american-life

**Feb 14**

Excerpt from Jack Abbott and Norman Mailer, *In the Belly of the Beast* [handout]  
Patricia McConnell, “Sing Soft, Sing Loud,” *Prison Writing* 294-306 [handout]  
Michel Foucault, excerpt from *Discipline and Punish* [ECampus]  
Atul Gawande, “Hell-hole”  
http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2009/03/30/hellhole

Interactive Map --  

**ARTWORK**

Fly in the Ointment
Views from Solitary -- Photographs

Damien Nichols
http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/how-making-art-on-death-row-saved-damien-echols-life_us_570c0ff0e4b0885fb50e0224

Recommended:

Adam Gopnick, “Learning from the Slaughter in Attica”

On *Hell is a Very Small Place*
http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/crime/2016/02/is_solitary_confinement_torture_former_inmates_on_life_in_isolation.html

Optional

Sat. Feb 18: APBP Training Day 10:00-1:00 at the Aull Center, 351 Spruce St.

Feb 21

Piri Thomas, *Down These Mean Streets*

Jimmy Santiago Baca, “Coming Into Language” [ECampus]


Recommended:

Caleb Smith, *Prison and the American Imagination*, pp 190-199 on Baca [ECampus—See “Caleb Smith and Butler” in Readings for April]


Feb 28

Dwayne Betts, *A Question of Freedom*

Betts, “Only Once I Considered Suicide” [handout]

Etheridge Knight, “Hard Rock Returns...” and “For Freckle-Faced Gerald” [handout]
Recommended:

Video on Angola: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7ABpWhY5Xzk

http://www.nationalreview.com/article/422476/over-incarceration-not-making-america-safer

Mar 4 -12 Spring Break

Mar 14
John Edgar Wideman, *Brothers and Keepers*


Recommended:
Eugene Philip Page, “‘Familiar Strangers’: The Quest for Connection and Self-Knowledge in *Brothers and Keepers*” [ECampus]


*Guantánamo Diary*
http://www.democracynow.org/2015/1/22/inside_the_us_torture_chambers_prisoners

**PRISON ABOLITION**

Mar 21
Assata Shakur, *Assata*

Angela Davis, Chap 3 of *Are Prisons Obsolete?*


Recommended:
Michael Hames-García, *Fugitive Justice*, chap. 3 [See Google Books]
http://humanities.williams.edu/joy-james/


DUE: Paper Proposal

March 28
Michelle Alexander, The New Jim Crow (esp Intro, chaps 1, 3, 5, 6)


Che Gossett, “Abolitionist Imaginings” (Interview with Bo Brown, Reina Gossett, and Dylan Rodriguez) [Ecampus]

Martin Luther King, Jr. “Letter from Birmingham Jail” [ECampus]


Recommended:
Interview with Angela Davis and Toni Morrison
http://news.ucsc.edu/2014/10/morrison-davis-q-a.html

Ruth Gilmore, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-chgMiCI90
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sTPjC-7EDkc

S. Lamble, “Carceral Logics: 10 Reasons to Dismantle the Prison Industrial Complex Through Queer/Trans Activism and Action,” Captive Genders.

DUE: Annotated Bibliography

March 31-April 2:
APBP / James Madison University Service-Learning Weekend
SPECIAL VIEWING: 13th (documentary film)

Apr 4
Leonard Peltier, Prison Writings: My Life is My Sun Dance


Doran Larson, “Why Scandinavian Prisons Are Superior”

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE? Research, Education, Art

Apr 11
Angela Davis, from *Are Prison Obsolete?* Introduction, Chaps 3 and 6

Paul St. John, “Behind the Mirror,” *Doing Time* [ECampus]

Dylan Rodriguez, chapter 2 of *Forced Passages* [ECampus]


Education Justice Project – U of Illinois U-C http://www.educationjustice.net/home/

Alabama Creative Arts + Education Project – Auburn http://apaep.auburn.edu/

Arizona State University Prison Education Program
https://english.asu.edu/research/community-university-initiatives/prison-english-program

Alcatraz Installation by Al Weiwei

Recommended:
Megan Sweeney, Chapter One from *Reading Is My Window* [ECampus]

Conversation with Angela Davis and Toni Morrison
http://www.filmsforaction.org/watch/angela-davis-and-toni-morrison-in-conversation-literacy-libraries-and-liberation/#.VHxnc3tjNK0.facebook

April 13-18
DUE: Essay Drafts (staggered deadlines)

Apr 18
Visit to Hazelton FCI

Paul Butler, excerpts from *Let's Get Free: A Hip-Hop Theory of Justice*
Chaps 1 and 9 [ECampus]


Bryan Stevenson, Commencement Address [ECampus]

April 20-25
DUE: Final Essays (staggered deadlines)

Apr 25
Concluding Thoughts

TBA: Prison Autobiographies Symposium