
Graduate Seminar on Prison Writing in America

E633
Spring 2019

11:00am – 12:15pm T/TH
1 Education

“Language gave me a way to keep the chaos of prison at bay and prevent it from devouring me; it was a resource that allowed me to confront and understand my past, even to wring from it some compelling truths, and it opened the way toward a future that was based not on fear or bitterness or apathy but on compassionate involvement and a belief that I belonged” (5).

From *A Place To Stand* by Jimmy Santiago Baca

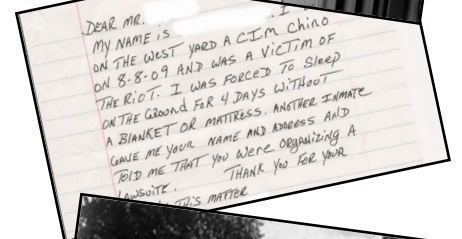
Although you have likely had opportunities to study historical literary periods and genres extensively, you may have encountered few texts composed in prison—or had the opportunity to put such texts in conversation with one another. This seminar is intended to strengthen your understanding of selected historical pieces and introduce you to contemporary American prison writings and contexts. As cultural and rhetorical critics, we will study works deemed ‘literature’ by the academy (and other cultural arts bodies) as well as writings that depend upon less conventional means of circulation (local writing workshops, contests, and on-line publications). The following questions will guide our exploration: *What is American prison writing, and when does such writing become literature? Is prison writing spectacle, art, therapy, or rehabilitation? How might incarceration influence composing processes? How do gender, racial, and cultural identity affect prison writing? How are prison writings received by ‘free’ audiences? Whose writings get published and why? What are the relationships between writing and freedom?*

This course aims to make connections between texts written in and about prison and the material world as we read within historical and sociocultural contexts and consider how a diverse set of American incarcerated writers approach writing as a meaning making process. In this way, our primary goal is to consider the role of language in constructing identities within discourse communities beyond the academy and often the conventional literary canon. Our examination will include memoir (Jimmy Santiago Baca & Sanger), drama (Miguel Piñero), fiction (James Baldwin), poetry (drawn from multiple sources), film, and critical writing (Angela Davis/Ted Conover) as well as sample texts from a local prison writing project. Welcome!

Required Texts

The first eight texts are the required books for this course. In addition, we will examine a variety of theoretical, pedagogical, and popular articles on prison writing as well as a range of small press/community-disseminated prison writings (available in class or on Canvas. All texts are available at the CSU Bookstore.

1. Jimmy Santiago Baca, *A Place to Stand: The Making of a Poet* (memoir)
2. James Baldwin, *If Beale Street Could Talk* (novel)
3. Ted Conover, *Newjack Guarding Sing Sing* (literary journalism)
4. Angela Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?* (social theory)
5. Tobi Jacobi and Ann Folwell Stanford, eds., *Women, Writing, and Prison* (nonfiction)
6. Pen America winners, *The Named and the Nameless* or E4C writers, *Don't Shake the Spoon*
7. Miguel Piñero, *Short Eyes: A Play* (drama)
8. Mary Ellen Sanger, *Blackbirds in the Pomegranate Tree* (fiction/memoir)
9. SpeakOut Journal (distributed in class, a local text) (poetry, fiction, essay, rants!)
10. Selected essays (available on our Canvas site) and films (shown in class or available online)



Course Goals

This seminar emphasizes synthesis, disciplinary and interdisciplinary analysis, collaboration, critical thinking, and connections to larger social and intellectual endeavors through the following goals:

- to understand debates surrounding the nature of writing as well as the role of **writing/language as cultural and social capital** for incarcerated writers.
- to consider the relationship between writing and the human experience as by examining **the will to compose** by writers confined to small and/or highly structured spaces.
- to consider the **issues of race, gender, social class, sexual identity, representation, and ethics** that influence the composing processes of the 21st century prison writer through the examination of contemporary prison literatures and theories of incarceration.
- to apply course content and debate to **lived experience through active engagement** with the local justice system (a cross-cultural writing exchange, writing workshops, etc.).

“until visiting hours were over
when I stood at that great
divide,
the visitor’s exit gate,
and watched my shirt and my
child leave
with my friend.”

From “After My Arrest” by Judith Clark

Finally, in considering how a diverse set of incarcerated writers approach writing as a meaning making process, in reading texts across gender, ethnicity, race, and time, and in tracing the circulation of those writings, this course aims to complicate and expand the way we make extend our disciplinary knowledge and make connections between literature and the material world. In this way, our primary goal is to consider **the role of language in constructing identities within discourse communities beyond the academy.**

Course Assignments and Evaluation

You will be expected to read all course texts and participate in class, written, and online activities. Written requirements will include a book review, weekly online dialogues, a research project, a collective engagement project and reflection, and a short presentation on an author of your choice. This course will use the +/- grading option. Broadly, your work will be evaluated based upon these activities:

1. **Prison Writing Analysis & Collaborative Book Review** (5-6 pages). This assignment gives you the opportunity to write a collaborative book review of either *The Named & The Nameless* or *Don’t shake the Spoon*, both 2018 anthologies featuring contemporary prison writers. The book reviews will be published in forthcoming special issue of *Reflections: A Journal of Community-Engaged Writing and Rhetoric* focused on prison writing. (Yes—your cv will benefit!) 1200 words total. More details forthcoming. **Due: 2/5 (draft), 2/12 (final group review + one page individual reflection).**
2. **Critical Questions & Reading Response Dialogues:** This is a reading intensive course, and throughout the semester you will have multiple opportunities to voice your questions, thoughts, and concerns. In addition to regular class participation, you’ll have these two opportunities:
 - **Critical quotes and questions:** You will identify one or two short passages in the day’s reading. Choose passages that confound, anger, reassure and/or motivate you. Bring 2-3 questions to complement the quote you choose. Your goal is to highlight the issues within the readings that you most want to discuss and to spark conversation that complicates, contextualizes, and/or challenges the issue at hand. **Due: once this semester.**
 - **Reading response dialogues:** Prompts for these conversations will be provided on our Canvas page and will likely emerge from our in-class discussions. You should compose a thoughtful response (at least one screen) to either the prompt itself or a peer’s post by the midnight before our next class (midnight Wednesday before Thursday’s class, for example). I encourage you to use our course readings and discussions as well as your individual research and experience as you grapple with the issues, dilemmas, problems and “solutions” offered by our ongoing exploration of prison writing. Thirteen forums will be available throughout the

semester (weeks 2-15); since we are all plagued by paper deadlines, overtime at work, sickness, or “tired” weeks, you are required to participate in ten. **Due: weekly (10 required, 13 available).**

3. **Research Project:** This research project is an opportunity to critically explore an issue that has emerged from our examination of prison writing. As you read, consider issues and concerns that are interesting, compelling, aggravating, and otherwise noteworthy. This project might be a theoretical one as you explore abstract possibilities or it might be grounded by an extended case study of one prison writer or context. On the other hand, you might choose to trace the historical roots of writing in one prison or imagine a creative response. Your project could take the form of a traditional seminar paper, a website, a documentary, etc.. The possibilities are endless—though the constraints of a semester timeline will necessitate a focused and targeted study. The criteria for evaluating your project include intellectual rigor, relevance to course focus and discussions, depth of research, and creativity. In any case, it should be the basis of your conference talk at our class prison writing conference in late April. More details are forthcoming, but your project will include the following:
 - Research Proposal (2-3 pages) and Preliminary Bibliography (7-10 sources) **Due: 2/26**
 - Annotated Bibliography (10-15 sources) **Due: 3/14**
 - Final Research Project (equivalent of 10-12 pages) **Draft due: 4/18; Final due: 5/7**
 - Conference Presentation (15 minutes) **Conference to be held during the last week of April 23/25**
4. **Prison Writing Engagement Project:** Whatever your position on the politics of imprisonment and justice, the fact remains that U.S. prisons are home to a significant number of people with low literacy skills and for whom intellectual & creative engagement is absent. In order to address this problem and to put some of our classroom theory into practice, you will have an opportunity to participate in one or more special opportunities this semester. For example, you might correspond with a writer confined in Larimer County (or potentially, SW England) or serve as a guest facilitator in a SpeakOut! workshop. We have a unique opportunity to participate in the upcoming Wyoming “Transformative Education in Prison and Beyond” Symposium (March 29/30) and to visit the Wyoming Territorial Prison Museum. There are other possibilities as well. This can be a collaborative project, presumably accomplished in a few small groups. The evaluation of this project will be based upon your participation and reflections (via collective and private writings). **More information forthcoming in February.**
5. **Beyond the Booklist: Chorus of Voices** The field of prison writing is vast, and our work with a wide range of writers will be necessarily limited. To compensate for this, you will choose one additional prison writer to introduce the class to through an 5-8-minute presentation and one page handout. You’ll offer some biographical and historical context and a close analysis of one or two texts by the author. A list of possible writers and full assignment sheet available on Canvas. **Due: May 7/9.**

Evaluation Summary

Prison Writing Book Review & Reflection	15%
Reading Response Dialogues & Critical Quotes/Questions	20%
Prison Writing Engagement Project	15%
Resistance/Change Research Project	40%
Project Proposal/Preliminary Bibliography (5%)	
Annotated Bibliography (10%)	
Conference Presentation & Research Essay (25%)	
Chorus of Voices	<u>10%</u>
	100%

***Note: Attendance is required in E633. Missing more than 2 classes will affect your final course grade.*

Course Policies

Your prompt **attendance is assumed**. Learning in an inquiry-based class is a matter of collaboration and experimentation. Without attending, class this is impossible. I do, however, recognize that situations arise which may make it impossible for you to be present. I will expect you to be professional in this area, keeping absences to a minimum and notifying me before class except in emergency situations. Missing more than two classes will likely affect your final grade.

Participation is also assumed, but **participation is not the same thing as attendance**. Participation includes showing a professional level of initiative: coming to class prepared, taking an active part in class discussions and group meetings, striving to make your work excellent instead of merely okay, and, in general, contributing your knowledge and insights. It also includes doing the required written work and handing it in appropriately and on time. Participation is an issue of ethics and responsibility and, especially in a course with an action component, a vital part of your learning experience.

Lesson #1: The first human right is to speak in one's own voice.

~Karlene Faith,
prison scholar

Late work is unacceptable, especially when it affects the work of other students in the class. If you are having a problem with an assignment, **contact me** before the due date and we may be able to negotiate some special arrangement. Any student with special needs (family situations, learning disabilities, hearing or vision problems) which might affect performance or participation in class, **please talk with me as soon as possible**. I will gladly consider how your situation will fit into our class, but I can't do this if you remain silent.

I encourage you to take ideas, drafts, etc. to our CSU writing center (Eddy 23) for feedback. And, of course, my door is always open (physically and virtually) if you need clarification or would like feedback on some emerging ideas. In graduate school, **academic integrity is highly valued**; plagiarism threatens both your own integrity as well as the process of making and refining knowledge (don't do it!). Additionally, CSU has adopted an honor code ("I will not give, receive, or use any unauthorized assistance."); while there are moments when I will encourage and expect collaborative effort, all work designated as individual should emerge from your own research and thinking. I will assume that all the work you submit adheres to the honor code. Failure to do so in the university can result in unpleasant consequences, including reprimands such as lowered grades, failure, or even dismissal.

Safety, Reporting and Resources: Recently the English Department recommended that faculty increase the visibility of our policies on Title IX reporting and student resources. I am happy to share them here and encourage you to talk with me about any experiences that I might be able to help you find resources for. Here is the official language that CSU has adopted:

CSU's Discrimination, Harassment, Sexual Harassment, Sexual Misconduct, Domestic Violence, Dating Violence, Stalking, and Retaliation policy designates faculty and employees of the University as "Responsible Employees." This designation is consistent with federal law and guidance, and requires faculty to report information regarding students who may have experienced any form of sexual harassment, sexual misconduct, relationship violence, stalking or retaliation. This includes information shared with faculty in person, electronic communications or in class assignments. As "Responsible Employees," faculty may refer students to campus resources (see below), together with informing the Office of Support and Safety Assessment to help ensure student safety and welfare. Information regarding sexual harassment, sexual misconduct, relationship violence, stalking and retaliation is treated with the greatest degree of confidentiality possible while also ensuring student and campus safety.

Any student who may be the victim of sexual harassment, sexual misconduct, relationship violence, stalking or retaliation is encouraged to report to CSU through one or more of the following resources:

- Emergency Response 911
- Deputy Title IX Coordinator/Office of Support and Safety Assessment (970) 491-1350
- Colorado State University Police Department (non-emergency) (970) 491-6425

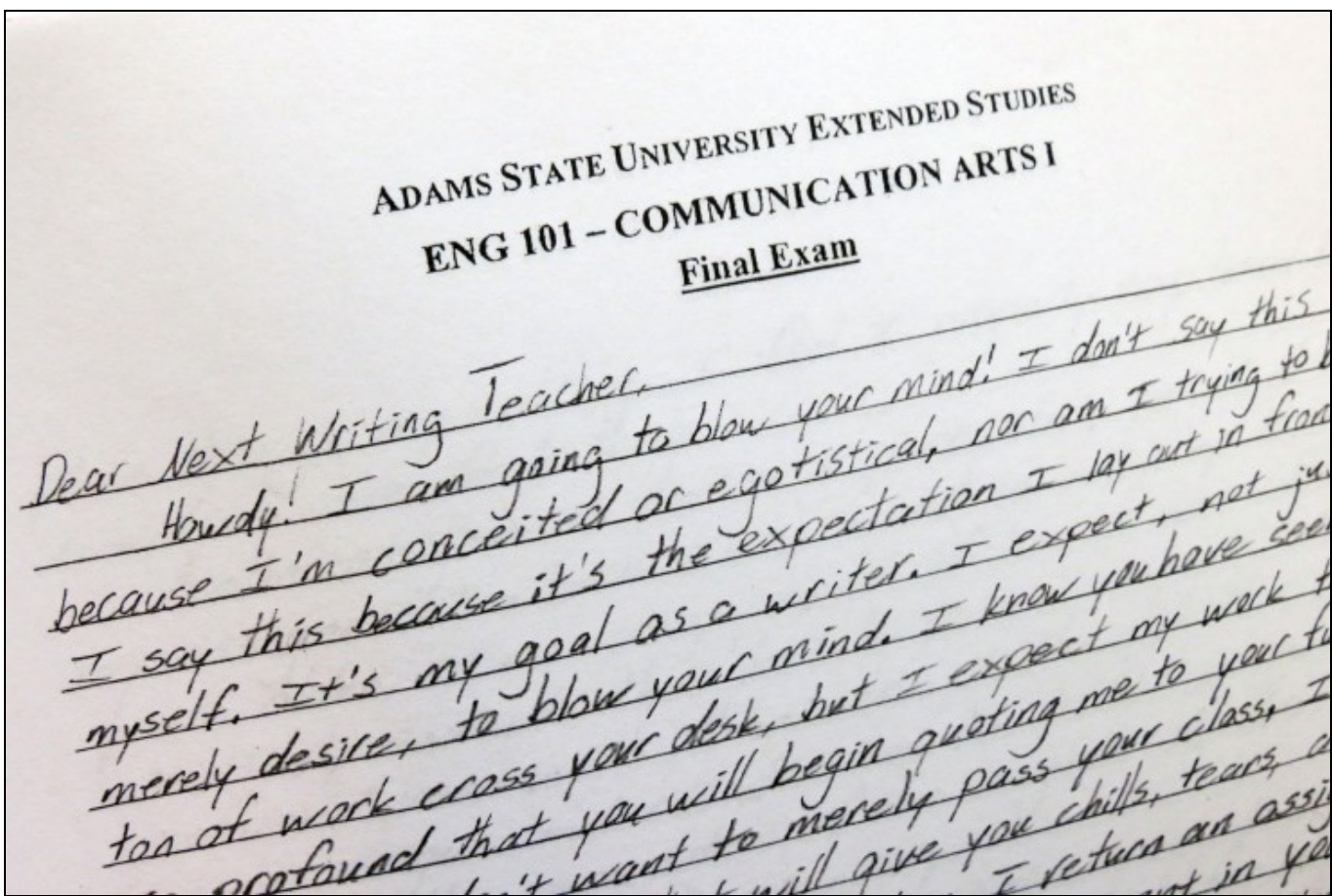
For counseling support and assistance, please see the CSU Health Network, which includes a variety of counseling services that can be accessed at: <http://www.health.colostate.edu/>. And, the Sexual Assault Victim Assistance Team is a confidential student resource that does not have a reporting requirement and that can be of great help to students who have experienced sexual assault. The web address is <http://www.wgac.colostate.edu/need-help-support>.

Technology

Computers are a **standard part of the writing** in our culture, especially in contexts beyond the academy. In this course, you will be expected to use computers as a vehicle for writing, research, and communications. We will be using Canvas to manage many of the details of the course (accessible through <http://canvas.colostate.edu>). While I understand that you may be familiar with specific programs, it is your responsibility to learn how to make those documents readable and to prepare your presentations for use during class in an appropriate format.

While computers save us great amounts of time over typewriters and make corrections much simpler, they are susceptible to crashing and freezing. Please save your work frequently, always make back up copies, and allow extra time. Printer malfunctions and inoperable flash drives are not good reasons for missing or late work. Anticipate these problems ahead of time and plan accordingly.

One final note: while I encourage the use of technology in facilitating research and writing, class time should not be used for personal communication. This includes personal email, texting, cell phone use, etc.. The latter is particularly disruptive; **please turn cell phones off before entering our classroom.**



About half of the prisoners write by hand because they don't have access to computers. Prisoners must write a cover letter that explains their assignment.

<http://www.cpr.org/news/story/these-alamosa-women-are-more-than-prison-pen-pals-they-re-teachers>

E 633 Course Overview (See our Canvas modules for daily assignments)

<p>Week 1 (January 22 & 24)</p> <p>In-class Focus: Course Introduction; Introduction to U.S. Prison System and Prison Writing</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Reading and Deadlines</p> <p>Introductions/forwards and selections from Jacobi/Stanford, Chevigny, and Franklin (latter two available on Canvas).</p>
Writing Prison in America (Weeks 2 – 4)	
<p>Week 2 (January 29 & 31), Week 3 (February 5 & 7), & Week 4 (February 12 & 14)</p> <p>In-class Focus: History of prison writing; Narratives and rhetorics of going and living inside. Approaches to Prison Writing</p> <p>Film Screening: “A Place to Stand”</p>	<p><i>The Named & The Nameless/Don't shake the Spoon</i> by contemporary prison writers <i>A Place to Stand</i> by Jimmy Santiago Baca Selected essays on prison writing theory/criticism (available on Canvas)</p> <p>Due 2/31: First online discussion available (you need 10) Due 2/5 & 2/12: Book review draft/final</p>
Theorizing Prison/Work (Weeks 5 – 6)	
<p>Week 5 (February 19 & 21) & Week 6 (February 26 & 28)</p> <p>In-class Focus: Theories of Incarceration and Social Justice; Perspectives of inmates & guards; Identity, race & power</p>	<p><i>Are Prisons Obsolete?</i> By Angela Davis <i>Newjack Guarding Sing Sing</i> by Ted Conover Selected essays on prison writing theory/criticism (available on Canvas)</p> <p>Due 2/26: Research Project Proposal</p>
Writing Long Sentences & Death Penalties (Week 7 – 8)	
<p>Week 7 (March 5 & 7) & Week 8 (March 12 & 14)</p> <p>In-class Focus: Rhetorics and Narratives of the Death Penalty; Writing Life Sentences</p> <p>Film Screening: tba</p>	<p>Selected essays on prison writing theory/criticism Featuring Assata, Sister Helen Prejean, Brian Stevenson, and Exonerated Writers (available on Canvas)</p> <p>Due 3/14: Research Project Annotated Bibliography</p>
<p>Week 9 (March 19 & 21)</p>	Spring Break: A week of self-care!
Educational Access & Prison (Week 10)	
<p>Week 10 (March 26 & 28)</p> <p>In-class Focus: Education in prison; Rhetorics of rehabilitation/reform/justice; Teaching narratives</p> <p>Film Screening: “The Last Graduation”</p>	<p>Selected essays on teaching and higher education in prison (Canvas); Encouraged: <i>Wagadu Journal</i> featuring WY women in prison (Canvas)</p> <p>**Save the Date: March 29/30: (free) conference at University of WY on prison education**</p>
Writing race, sexuality, and relationships (Weeks 11 – 13)	
<p>Week 11 (April 2 & 4), Week 12 (April 9 & 11), & Week 13 (April 16 & 18)</p> <p>In-class Focus: Race, sexuality, gender and relationships inside; Experiences of family inside and out;</p> <p>Film Screening: “Pinero” and “Short Eyes” Film Screening: “What We Leave Behind”</p>	<p><i>Short Eyes</i> by Miguel Piñero <i>If Beale Street Could Talk</i> by James Baldwin</p> <p>Selected writings on sexuality, family, love, and prison (available on Canvas)</p> <p>Due 4/18: Draft of Research Project for in-class workshop</p>
Writing, Art & Social Justice (Weeks 14 – 15)	
<p>Week 14 (April 23 & 25) & Week 15 (April 30 & May 2)</p> <p>In-class Focus: Women’s experiences writing prison; Writing as/for social justice; prison arts programs</p> <p>Film Screening: “What I want my words to do to you” and/or “We are Just Telling Stories”</p>	<p><i>Blackbirds in Pomegranate Tree</i> by Mary Ellen Sanger <i>SpeakOut Journal</i></p> <p>Due April 23/25: Class Prison Writing Conference: 15 research presentations (final project due 5/7)</p> <p>Week 15: Last dialogue available (you need 10)</p>
<p>Week 16 (May 7 & 9) & Finals Week</p> <p>In-class Focus: Writing as/for social justice; prison arts programs</p>	<p>Selected writings on prison arts outreach (Canvas)</p> <p>Due May 7 & 9: Chorus of Voices projects</p> <p>**Save the Date: Attend a SpeakOut journal launch on M, W, or TH</p>