

Prison Literature in the United States: The Carceral State and Post-1900 American Literature



Professor: Dr. Frank García

Office Hours: By Appointment via Zoom

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(If you have not received a response within 48 hours, please email me again.)

Course Description

This class introduces students to the emergence of the modern carceral state and its engagements with neoliberalism, mass incarceration, and the prison industrial complex while theorizing carceral power through the lenses of critical race theory, continental philosophy, and queer feminist theory. In doing so, students will read a range of literary forms (poetry, memoir, essays, graphic novels, etc.) to study how the prison literary tradition creates an alternative epistemology that unveils the prison's maintenance of racial capitalism, white supremacy, and the racialized, heteropatriarchal nation-state. This class, however, is not solely limited to prison proper but, instead, considers how recent bi-partisan calls to reduce mass incarceration conceal the carceral state's adaptations to evolving and alternative racial politics. As such, the class examines the extensions of the carceral state to those not "technically" imprisoned but nonetheless navigating carceral power and its repressive apparatuses, addressing topics like the shared experience of prison life amongst an incarcerated person's family and navigating recidivism threats while experiencing legalized discrimination in post-prison life.

Trigger/Explicit Content Warning: This course features explicit material that can be offensive and triggering for many people, including but not limited to literary and visual representations of violence, rape, and sexual assault. Additionally, many course texts will also contain derogatory language on the basis of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and religion. Some films may also feature nudity. Class sessions may involve discussing and critically engaging this material on the grounds of academic freedom and intellectual development.

Course Texts (Available at Barnes and Noble at Rutgers University, Newark)

Books:

A Place to Stand by Jimmy Santiago Baca
Yesterday Will Make You Cry by Chester Himes
Are Prisons Obsolete? by Angela Davis
The Prisoner's Wife by Asha Bandele
The Red Letter Plays by Suzan Lori-Parks
They Called Us Enemy by George Takei

Films:

American Me (1992)

Other:

Select PDFs Available on Canvas

Course Assignments

Midterm Exam (25%): This midterm will cover material from weeks 1-7 and will consist of short-answer and passage-identification questions. Questions will cover the readings, lecture information, and class discussions, so make sure to take active notes during discussion because major themes, points, and readings teased out during discussion will appear on the exam.

Final Exam (25%): This midterm will cover material from weeks 8-15 and will consist of short-answer, passage-identification, and essay questions. Questions will cover the readings, lecture information, and class discussions, so make sure to take active notes during discussion because major themes, points, and readings teased out during discussion will appear on the exam.

Discussion Forum (25%): **Almost each class session (twice a week)**, you are expected to post to Canvas a brief (at least 150 words) critical question or comment about the assigned reading(s). This question does **NOT** need to address every assigned text for the week nor everything *about* a particular text. Instead, focus on **ONE** issue or idea, typically from **ONE** reading. These questions and/or comments should feature a **close reading and evidence from the text. They should NOT be general questions/comments that do not draw from textual evidence/observations, that can be said about any text, or that move discussions away from the text.** In the forum, you are engaging in a conversation about a text, so try to enlarge the conversation and avoid repeating what others have already said.

You must also write at least **two 100-word responses** to your peers' comments/questions for each class session. Your comments should engage intellectually with your peers' observations and, like your own questions, should draw from the text. These responses may refer to the same portion of the text your peers are engaging or draw from other portions of the text that you feel are relevant to your peers' questions/comments. Feel free to agree or disagree (or both) with your peers, though do keep the conversation civil. *If one of your peer's posts has already attained 5 responses, you must respond to someone else's.*

Discussion Forum Grading/Deadlines: Discussion posts are graded as credit/no-credit. To receive full credit, you must write your own 150-word post and two 100-word responses to your peers' thoughts. Students who have not provided two comments will receive zero credit for the assignment, even if they have written their own 150-word post. The same applies for students who provide comments but do not write their own 150-word post. **Posts and comments must include parenthetical citations and be properly proofread.** For Monday classes, you must submit your discussion post by **Sunday by 9 pm.** For Wednesday classes, you must submit your discussion post **Tuesday by 9 pm.** Your two comments to your peers' work are always due **before the start of each class session.**

Late work (comments and posts) will not be accepted. *Posts that show little thinking beyond the obvious and that are visibly hurried written will receive zero credit.* You may miss up to 2 discussion posts without penalty.

Sufficient discussion posts and comments would resemble the following example:

Post

“In ‘The Legend of Sleepy Hollow,’ Ichabod Crane is described as being a man that is well-known and respected around the neighborhood. He ‘assisted farmers occasionally in the lighter labors of their farms,’ he ‘was the singing-master of the neighborhood,’ and other men ‘[envied] his superior elegance and address’ (15). This means that Ichabod was well-established and lived a good life in general in this neighborhood, and others thought of him as a good person. However, he still talked about courting Katrina as if there was some major material gain to be had from the relationship, which is shown when ‘his heart yearned after the damsel who was to inherit these domains, and his imagination expanded with the idea, how they might be readily turned into cash’ (18). Furthermore, there is not much mention of romance between Ichabod and Katrina; he almost exclusively talks of her as some sort of prize to be won or an easy way to inherit a large fortune. Why does Ichabod seem motivated solely by greed and the desire for material wealth even though he is already well off and well-established in the community? Why does the community view Ichabod as a wholesome, helpful, and profound figure, even though all he thinks of in the story is taking advantage of others to gain money or to improve his social status?”

Comment

“There is a notable disconnect between the virtuous way in which Ichabod Crane is described and the pretty disgusting attitude he takes towards a student of his (at least by today’s standards). Regarding his status in the community, though, it seems that one of his chief motivations for pursuing Katrina is the opportunity to establish himself as a rich member of the community, but it is striking that no motivation is given to Katrina one way or another. The only line I could find that gave any insight into her feelings on the matter was when ‘it was whispered that she did not altogether discourage his (Bones’) hopes’ (19). This statement could mean just about anything, but it seems to me that she doesn’t want this status of the ‘desirable prize.’ The phrase ‘not altogether discourage’ feels a lot like she would actively discourage these men, if she felt she had the authority or power to do so. I’m still uncertain to what degree, if any, the story is meant to comment on this lack of agency, but it’s hard not to notice how prominently Katrina figures in the story while having no say over the rivalry that blooms.”

Participation (25%): Always come to class prepared and having read the assigned material. This course constructs itself primarily upon a discussion-based bedrock, so your participation in class discussions is essential to the success of the course and development of your learning. Again, this precept means coming to class having read the material and prepared to discuss each reading with your peers. I understand some students may find speaking to and in a classroom full of strangers incredibly intimidating, but learning to communicate your thoughts and ideas verbally remains an integral part of college and an asset that will benefit you both during and after your undergraduate careers. Consequently, I expect each student to contribute multiple times to the conversation at hand during most class sessions, and *I reserve the right to call on students who are particularly quiet during class discussion.*

Participation is graded on a credit/no-credit basis. I should hear from each student multiple times per class session. If you have trouble thinking on your feet, use your daily critical questions/comments to galvanize discussion contributions. If you are the type of student who excessively misses class, speaks up only once every 2 weeks or not at all, or, in general, prefers to be seen but not heard, you should enroll in another course because you will receive a zero for your participation grade.

A Note for Those Who Are Apprehensive About Speaking in Class:

I understand that the reasons many students are hesitant to speak during class discussions stem from how their peers or professor will perceive them. Students often worry about:

- *Stuttering when speaking
- *Sounding or saying “stupid” things
- *Their professor or peers thinking that they are “dumb”
- *Having an accent or speaking a non-standard English dialect
- *Being wrong
- *Being unable to communicate verbally what they are thinking
- *Not having a fully-formed thought or being unsure about what they are about to say
- *Their professor or peers laughing at or making fun of them
- *Their professor or peers disagreeing with them
- *Later backtracking or changing their mind

These fears are reasonable and common, and I myself suffered from many of them during my undergraduate classes and even in graduate school. Rest assured, **I do not care** if you are wrong, stutter, have an accent, disagree with me, take five minutes to convey what you want to say, stumble over yourself, backtrack or change your mind, or have not fully formed your thoughts, and I will never, ever make fun of you, think you are “dumb,” dismiss your contributions, or say your interpretive analyses are wrong—nor will I allow your peers to do any of these actions as well. **If you mess up, that is okay.** The classroom is the place to screw up and make mistakes so that we can learn. I value and welcome all of your contributions to discussions and am eager to learn from your comments—even if you have a different interpretation or opinion than me! I implore you to be vocal during class discussion, even if scared, because doing so will only improve your ability to communicate verbally to large audiences, which is a skill that will benefit you throughout your academic and professional careers, regardless of major.

Classroom Etiquette

Rutgers University, Newark features a diverse student and faculty body, and this class will bring together many persons of various backgrounds, identities, cultures, beliefs, etc. Each student will always be mindful of these differences and will treat every student with respect. We will also be engaging in discussions about topics that we feel very passionate about, but we must always make sure to treat opposing points-of-view with courtesy, understanding, and respect. This class has a zero-tolerance policy for belittling, mocking, hostile, and/or discriminatory behavior, and if you behave in this manner towards other students, guest speakers, or the professor or become disruptive whatsoever, you will be dismissed from class, receive an automatic zero on your entire participation grade for the course, and accept whatever absence penalty (both course and university sanctions) accompany the dismissal.

Late Work Policy

Late work is not accepted under any circumstances without an accommodations letter from the Office of the Dean of Students. If you are ill, have a busy week, or forget about an assignment, keep in mind that two discussion posts are dropped at the end of the semester.

Family Death Policy: Please note that appeals for extensions because of family deaths should be forwarded to the Office of the Dean of Students, not the professor. Should the Office of the Dean of Students provide a student an accommodations letter, the professor will strive to ensure all accommodations outlined in the letter are reasonably met.

Attendance Policy

Your presence and active participation in this course is essential to your success in this course. Attendance at all class sessions is expected. **If you are absent for more than two meetings, you will have your overall participation grade for the course deducted one-third of a letter grade (e.g. a B+ will become a B) for each additional absence. If you are more than 5 minutes late you will be marked absent for that day.** If you are absent for the equivalent of three weeks (6 class meetings), you will receive a zero for your participation grade. ***It is your responsibility to know how many absences you have. Do not ask me. I will not give students warnings on how many absences they have.*** The only time I will look at absences is when I calculate grades at the end of the course. If your attendance warrants a grade penalty when I calculate grades, then your grade will be penalized, without warning. Once again, make sure you know how many absences you have.

Please do not email me explaining why you missed class. It's none of my business. If you want to skip to go skiing, then go. If you need to skip because you are ill, then skip. You don't need to tell me.

Excused absences not counted against these totals include religious holidays, University-sponsored events documented with an official letter, or serious illness or family emergency excused with a letter from the Office of the Dean of Students.

Electronics Policy

On the majority of class days, pen and paper will suffice for note-taking, and laptops, tablets, e-readers, etc. will not be permitted during class (unless you are granted an accommodation that

is properly documented through Disability Services), as many of our class sessions will involve you focusing on and discussing and interacting with your peers. Because you are required to bring a hard copy of Canvas readings to class, electronic devices are not necessary. At no time should cell phones be used; they should be turned off/silenced and put away during class.

Continual Electronics Policy infractions will result in a 0 for your overall class participation grade, and I reserve the right to penalize you without notifying you of your behavior.

(Dis)ability Accommodations

The professor will strive to ensure that all students are provided equity, access, and support in this course. If you require an academic accommodation due to (dis)ability, please contact the Office of Disability Services and attain a letter of accommodation. After the student provides the professor with a copy of the letter, the professor will work with the student and Office of Disability Services to ensure all accommodations specified in the letter are provided.

COVID-19, Roll, and Mask Mandates

In order to protect the health and wellbeing of all members of the Rutgers-Newark community, masks must be worn by all persons inside campus buildings when in the presence of others, and in buildings in non-private enclosed settings (e.g., common workspaces, workstations, meeting rooms, classrooms, etc.). Masks should conform to CDC guidelines and should securely cover the nose and mouth. Masks must be worn during class meetings. Each day before you arrive on campus or leave your residence hall, you must complete the brief survey on the My Campus Pass symptom checker self-screening app found at myRutgers Portal.

At the beginning of each class session, the professor is required to take roll to assist with contact tracing, should a positive COVID-19 case arise in our class.

Course Calendar

“Unit 1: Theorizing Carceral Power”

Week 1

Weds 9/1: Introduction to Class

Week 2

Mon 9/6: No Class (Labor Day)

Weds 9/8: No Reading (Lecture on Prison History)

Week 3

Mon 9/13: Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow* (50-73, 175-211)

Weds 9/15: Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow* (25-32)
Charles Mills, *The Racial Contract* (9-40)
Bettina Aptheker, “The Social Functions of the Prisons in the United States”

Due: Discussion Post Assignment

“Unit 2: The Radical Prison Intellectual”

Week 4

Mon 9/20: Angela Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?* (Chapters 1-3)

Due: Discussion Post Assignment

Weds 9/22: Angela Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?* (Chapters 4-6)

Due: Discussion Post Assignment

Week 5

Mon 9/27: Regina Kunzel, *Criminal Intimacy* (169-180)
Eldridge Cleaver, “On Becoming” (21-36)
“The Allegory of the Black Eunuchs” (183-204)

Due: Discussion Post Assignment

Weds 9/29: Michelle Alexander, “White Victims of Racial Caste” (204-208)

Jack Henry Abbott, “State-Raised Convict”
“Racism in America and Behind Bars”

Due: Discussion Post Assignment

Week 6

Mon 10/4: Jimmy Santiago Baca, *A Place to Stand* (Prologue-Chapter 6)

Due: Discussion Post Assignment

Weds 10/6: Jimmy Santiago Baca, *A Place to Stand* (Chapter 7-Finish)

Due: Discussion Post Assignment

Week 7

Mon 10/11: Kinnari Jivani, “Wearing Blues”
Kathy Boudin, “A Trilogy of Journeys”
Mayra Collado, “Mother”
Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, “To the Prison Madonnas”
“Sublimation”
“On Prison Beauty”

Due: Discussion Post Assignment

Weds 10/13: Office Hours

“Unit 3: Rearticulating Prison Sexuality & Masculinity”

Week 8

Mon 10/18: Midterm Exam

Weds 10/20: Holli Hampton, “The Chase”
Tiffany Jackson, “The Thing Called Love Virus”
Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, “Farewell to Claudia”
“A Friend”
“How I Long to See a Man”

Due: Discussion Post Assignment

Week 9

Mon 10/25: Regina Kunzel, “The Problem of Prison Sex in Mid-Twentieth-Century America”

Weds 10/27: *American Me*

Due: Discussion Post Assignment

Week 10

Mon 11/1: Chester Himes, *Yesterday Will Make You Cry* (25-108)

Due: Discussion Post Assignment

Weds 11/3: Chester Himes, *Yesterday Will Make You Cry* (111-198)

Due: Discussion Post Assignment

Week 11

Mon 11/8: Chester Himes, *Yesterday Will Make You Cry* (198-275)

Due: Discussion Post Assignment

Weds 11/10: Chester Himes, *Yesterday Will Make You Cry* (275-Finish)

Due: Discussion Post Assignment

“Unit 4: Alternative Incarcerations”

Week 12

Mon 11/15: In-Class Screening of *The Prison in 12 Landscapes*
Brett Story, *Prison Land* (1-12)

*This syllabus is subject to change at my discretion.

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Weds 11/17: Suzan Lori-Parks, *Fucking A*
Due: **Discussion Post Assignment**

Week 13

Mon 11/22: Thanksgiving Break

Weds 11/23: Thanksgiving Break

Week 14

Mon 11/29: Asha Bandele, *The Prisoner's Wife* (13-118)
Due: **Discussion Post Assignment**

Weds 12/1: Asha Bandele, *The Prisoner's Wife* (119-Finish)
Due: **Discussion Post Assignment**

Week 15

Mon 12/6: George Takei, *They Called Us Enemy* (5-100)
Due: **Discussion Post Assignment**

Weds 12/8: George Takei, *They Called Us Enemy* (101-Finish)
Due: **Discussion Post Assignment**

Week 16

Mon 12/13: Office Hours