



**Instructor:** Ira Wells

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**Course Number:** ENG434H5S

**Course Title:** American Prison Literature

**Course description:** The past few decades have witnessed a staggering prison boom in America. Since the mid-1970s, the American prison population has exploded from 380,000 to 2.2 million; America now has a higher documented rate of imprisonment than any other nation in the world. Incarceration rates reflect existing divisions between race, class, gender, and education, but they also exacerbate those divisions. This course investigates the literary and imaginative response to the rise of the prison industrial-complex in America. Many of the authors we'll study, such as Jimmy Santiago Baca, began their careers in prison; others, like Norman Mailer, imagined the prison experience from "outside." All of these authors anatomize the psychological, spiritual, and physical horrors wrought by the experience of extended incarceration. Alongside some of the major examples of prison writing from the past century, we'll consider issues including race and ethnicity, the privatization of prisons, their replacement of mental institutions, and the politicization of punishment. We'll think about the poetics of prison literature, trace the relationship between confinement and the literary impulse, and explore the links between literary and legal transgression.

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**Required Reading:** Texts likely to include: Michel Foucault, "The Carceral" from *Discipline and Punish*; Jack Henry Abbott, *In the Belly of the Beast*; John J. Gibbons and Nicholas de B. Katzenbach, *Confronting Confinement: A Report of the Commission on Safety and Abuse in America's Prisons*; Mumia Abu-Jamal, "B-Block Days and Nightmares," "Skeleton Bay," "Already out of the Game"; Chester Himes, "To What Red Hell"; Martin Luther King Jr., "Letter from Birmingham Jail"; Malcolm X, from *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*; George Jackson, *Soledad Brother*; Iceberg Slim, *The Naked Soul of Iceberg Slim*; Conrad Black, *A Matter of Principle*; Norman Mailer, *The Executioner's Song*

**First Three Texts/Authors to be Studied:** Foucault, Abbott, Gibbons and Katzenbach

**Method of Instruction:** Seminar / discussion

**Method of Evaluation:** One seminar presentation, one seminar "response," essay prospectus, research essay, class participation.