

**ENGLISH 4880**  
**Convict Literature**

**Dr. Jason Haslam**

**Fall 2013**

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I have been studying how I may compare  
 This prison where I live unto the world.  
 --William Shakespeare, *Richard II*

In this course, we will analyze 19th- and 20th-century texts by authors who, like Shakespeare's *Richard II*, compare the prisons in which they live to the larger society. While still under-represented, prison writing is fast becoming a major area of literary and cultural research; therefore, this course aims to help us engage in various discussions surrounding the prison, including the study of prisoners' writings themselves. We may also look at some fictional portrayals of the prison in order to explore the larger cultural roles that this institution plays.

Forming a discursive community within larger literary traditions, prison literature explicitly deals with the interplay between text, community, and power, often framing this as a relationship between writing, identity, oppression. This is an especially important discussion when one considers the ideological nature of courts and other legal venues, a worry in the West's explicitly (if not theoretically) classed, raced, and gendered justice system and, as studies from across the disciplines have shown, in other social institutions as well. Additionally, we will delve into the way in which modern prison practices and prisoners' narratives are informed by the history of imperialism, institutionalized slavery, and slave narratives, as such critics as Angela Y. Davis, H. Bruce Franklin, and Joy James have discussed. Such analyses will provide an historical backdrop against which to further our understandings of prisoners' literature.

Many of the texts we will examine are autobiographical, and so our studies will often involve theoretical discussions of that genre and its relations to subjectivity and identity in general. Due to the specifics of prison history, these discussions will also be tied to material and discursive practices surrounding race, gender, and class.

**Required Texts:** All texts, except the course reading package, are available in the Dalhousie bookstore. The course reading package is available at Campus Copy.

Charles Dickens, *Little Dorrit*

Constance Lytton, *Prisons and Prisoners: Some Personal Experiences*

James Tyman, *Inside Out: An Autobiography of a Native Canadian*.

John Edgar Wideman, *Brothers and Keepers*

Course Reading Package on BbLearn/OWL

### Assignments

Seminar Presentation (reading time: 10-15 minutes; written: approx. 1500-2400 words): 20%

In-class Tests: 10% each = 20%; **October 23rd** and **December 2nd**

Essay Proposal and Annotated Bibliography: 15%; Due **November 13th**

Research Essay, 3600-4500 words (approx. 12-15 pages, double spaced); Due **December 9th** by 4:00 p.m.: 35%

Attendance and Participation: 10%

### Assignment Descriptions

**Seminar Presentation:** There are a few options for this 10- to 15-minute presentation (approx 5-8 pages, double spaced). You can analyze either the literary text(s), critical/theoretical text(s), or a combination thereof, that are scheduled for the class in which the seminar is given. In addition, you can also present on a text not on the schedule, but that is written by one of the authors being studied that day. In any of these cases, the presentation should consist of a cohesive argument and analysis of the text(s) you choose. While some summary may be appropriate (especially if analysing a text from outside of the reading list), the vast majority of the presentation should critically *analyze* the work you are discussing. In other words, this seminar should follow exactly the format you would use for a formal essay, regardless of which text you examine.

**A formal written version of the seminar will be handed in before the class in which you present.** The presentation itself and the written version will each be worth half of the assignment's grade.

A sign-in sheet for presentations will be available after the first class. Presentations will begin on September 18th. Because of enrollment numbers, some overlap should be expected, and even welcome!

**In-class tests:** These assignments are designed to test your basic knowledge of the texts we are reading, your comprehension of class discussion, and your analytical ability. Each test will consist of close readings and interpretations of some short passages chosen from the works studied.

**Annotated bibliography and essay proposal:** This assignment is designed to help you to understand and engage in the larger critical discussion surrounding the works we are reading. It is also designed to give you a head start on the final essay. You may use your seminar as the foundation of the final essay but, in addition to expanding it to fit the length requirements you are expected to revise the argument following the instructor's comments and pertinent class discussions.

For the bibliography, you will be required to hand in a list of **five critical works** concerning the texts and/or issues that you want to write about in your final essay. (You are not required to write your essay about the works you mention in the bibliography assignment, but doing so would help you to use your time more effectively.) All citations must be done according to MLA guidelines; the list should look exactly like a works cited list.

**Two** of the titles in this list must be annotated--that is, you must provide a brief description (one paragraph) of the argument presented in the essay (please do this on a separate

page). You must also state, briefly (no more than two or three sentences) how you think these essays will help you with the development of your own argument about a particular literary text from the course readings. **NOTE: the summaries must be in your own words and contain properly documented quotations, or they could be subject to policies regarding plagiarism.**

In addition, you will provide a one-page (300-word) proposal for your final essay. This part of the assignment should present which two works you will study, the general area of enquiry and specific focus for your essay (some topics will be handed out), and a thesis statement which maps out the argument you are proposing. The proposal should also briefly address the critical or theoretical implications of your essay (see the annotated bibliography part of the assignment). Note: you can decide to change your topic after this assignment but, if you do, you are required to discuss the new topic with the instructor. **The most effective way to write this proposal is to view it as a draft of the first page/introduction of the essay.**

This assignment is worth 15% of the course grade. The introduction/proposal will be worth 10/15, and the annotated bibliography will be worth 5/15 (MLA style will be worth 2.5; the annotations will be worth the other 2.5). Proper research techniques and sources will be discussed in class.

#### **Checklist for the bibliography/proposal assignment:**

- one-page proposal**
- bibliography of five essays (done as an MLA “works cited” list)**
- separate page(s) with annotations for two of the essays**

**Research Essay:** In the essay, you will analyse one or two of the primary texts we have studied during the term. You will construct a cohesive argument about the text(s), and **use at least two theoretical/critical text (but no more than ten)** to support your argument (see annotated bibliography assignment). Again, you may use your seminar as the foundation of the final essay but, in addition to expanding it to fit the length requirements you are expected to revise the argument following the instructor’s comments and pertinent class discussions.

**Attendance and Participation:** Each of these will be worth half of the 10%. The attendance mark will be based on attending each class and signing the sign-in sheet. The participation mark will be based on activity in class discussions, on the level of engagement with the text that is demonstrated (i.e. you must demonstrate that you have read \*and\* thought seriously about the text before class), as well as on your engaged, helpful, rigorous, and respectful discussion of the issues raised in your classmates’ presentations.

#### **Other Course and University Policies**

##### Late Penalties and Missed Assignments

**All formal written assignments are to be submitted through BbLearn/OWL before the beginning of class on the date indicated, or at the time and date indicated.** Late assignments will be docked 5% for each 24 hours that they are late. For example, a paper due at 12:00 pm on Day 1 will drop 5% starting at 12:01 pm on Day 1, another 5% starting at 12:01 pm

on Day 2, etc. Assignments will not be accepted after the marked, on-time assignments are handed back; any assignment not handed in by that point will be given a grade of zero. Marking schedules will be made clear in class.

In-class assignments can only be written during the time and date listed on the syllabus. Missed assignments will be assigned a grade of zero.

Only properly documented medical problems or other documented severe circumstances which are out of your control will be accepted as excuses for late or missed assignments.

### Plagiarism

All students in this class are to read and understand the policies on academic integrity and plagiarism referenced in the Policies and Student Resources sections of the [academicintegrity.dal.ca](http://academicintegrity.dal.ca) website. Ignorance of such policies is no excuse for violations. Any paper submitted by a student at Dalhousie University may be checked for originality to confirm that the student has not plagiarized from other sources. Plagiarism is considered a serious academic offence which may lead to loss of credit, suspension or expulsion from the University, or even to the revocation of a degree. It is essential that there be correct attribution of authorities from which facts and opinions have been derived. At Dalhousie there are University Regulations which deal with plagiarism and, prior to submitting any paper in a course, students should read the Policy on Intellectual Honesty contained in the Calendar or on the Online Dalhousie website. The Senate has affirmed the right of any instructor to require that student papers be submitted in both written and computer-readable format, and to submit any paper to be checked electronically for originality. As a student in this class, you are to keep an electronic copy of any paper you submit, and the course instructor may require you to submit that electronic copy on demand.

### AASC Statement on Accessibility

Students may request accommodation as a result of barriers related to disability, religious obligation, or any characteristic under the Nova Scotia Human Rights Act. Students who require academic accommodation for either classroom participation or the writing of tests and exams should make their request to the Advising and Access Services Center (AASC) prior to or at the outset of the regular academic year. Please visit [www.dal.ca/access](http://www.dal.ca/access) for more information and to obtain the Request for Accommodation – Form A.

A note taker may be required as part of a student's accommodation. There is an honorarium of \$75/course/term (with some exceptions). If you are interested, please contact AASC at 494-2836 for more information.

Please note that your classroom may contain specialized accessible furniture and equipment. It is important that these items remain in the classroom, untouched, so that students who require their usage will be able to participate in the class.

### Netiquette

Sometimes, students may want to continue a discussion from class outside of the classroom itself. Until recently, such discussions were limited to face-to-face interactions with other students, friends, and/or the professor during office hours. Now, however, we have the digital tools to continue that conversation with the whole class, and even people not enrolled in the course. In this course, we have available to us discussion boards on the BbLearn/OWL page,

as well as Twitter (where we can use the #DalPrisonLit hashtag to group our conversations). Posting to these forums is not required; they are merely one of several means of communication.

These technologies can offer an exciting way to engage in meaningful conversation outside of the class, but they do come with certain risks: the nature of online interaction can remove certain social cues many people rely on to judge how others are reacting to their comments, which can cause problems, and even shut down—rather than open up—dialogue. This problem is exacerbated on such platforms as Twitter, which by nature are open to the public, extending beyond the people directly involved in the class.

In order to avoid problems of this sort, students are asked to follow the guidelines below, as well as use their common sense, regarding what they post:

- *follow the guidelines of the Student Code of Conduct*
  - rude or abusive behaviour will result in an official complaint being filed, as per the Student Code of Conduct; see [http://www.dal.ca/campus\\_life/student\\_services/student-rights-and-responsibilities/student-life-policies/code-of-student-conduct.html](http://www.dal.ca/campus_life/student_services/student-rights-and-responsibilities/student-life-policies/code-of-student-conduct.html);
- *don't be condescending*
  - even when you disagree with someone, if you strive to find common ground then you can make your case to them more strongly than if you act like a know-it-all;
- *don't be creepy*
  - don't make overly personal comments, or discuss things you wouldn't bring up in a general classroom setting; statements that come across as clearly sarcastic or as jokes in person—because of context, facial cues, etc.—can register much differently online;
- *don't use profanity*
  - “swears” can sound much harsher online than in person, especially if they seem directed at a person (this is one rule that your professor may himself on occasion break, but he's had many more decades of practice...);
- *disengage*
  - if a conversation takes an unpleasant turn, disengage, inform the professor, and remember that twitter has a block feature.
- *be helpful, be informative*
  - some good behaviour: stick to discussions that relate to class; provide informative, on-point links; ask questions! These are what such forums are for!

### Reading and Class Schedule

(notes: readings with an asterisk next to them are in the course reading package, available at Campus Copy; also listed are the number of available seminar-presentation times for each class)

- Sept. 9 Introduction; research lecture
- 11 Richard Lovelace, “To Althea, from Prison,” “To Lucasta, from Prison”\*; Victor Brombert, “The Happy Prison: A Recurring Romantic Metaphor”\*; Henry David Thoreau, “Civil Disobedience”\*
- 16 Jeremy Bentham, *The Panopticon Writings* (sel.)\*; Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* (sel.)\*
- 18 Edgar Allan Poe, “The Pit and the Pendulum,”\* “The Tell-Tale Heart”\*; Colin (Joan) Dayan, “Poe, Persons, and Property”\*; **2 seminars**
- 23 Oscar Wilde, “Ballad of Reading Gaol,” *De Profundis*\*; Ed Cohen, *Talk on the Wilde Side: Toward a Genealogy of a Discourse on Male Sexualities* (sel.)\*; **1 seminar**
- 25 Charles Dickens, *Little Dorrit*; Randall McGowen, “The Well-Ordered Prison: England, 1780-1865”\*; **2 seminars**
- 30 Dickens, continued; Martin J. Wiener, *Reconstructing the Criminal: Culture, Law, and Policy in England, 1830-1914* (sel.)\*; **1 seminar**
- Oct. 2 Dickens, continued; **1 seminar**
- 7 Departments of States and Official Bodies, Home Office, “Suffragist Women Prisoners”; Kate Lilley, *Prisoners and Prison Life* (both the Home Office document and Lilley are in Appendix E. of the Lytton edition); Barbara Green, *Spectacular Confessions: Autobiography, Performative Activism, and the Sites of Suffrage 1905-1938* (sel.)\*; **1 seminar**
- 9 Constance Lytton, *Prisons and Prisoners: Some Personal Experiences*; **2 seminars**
- 14 Lytton, continued; Sidonie Smith, *Subjectivity, Identity, and the Body: Women’s Autobiographical Practices in the Twentieth Century* (sel.)\*
- 16 Agnes Smedley, *Cell Mates* (sel.)\*; Kate Richards O’Hare, *Crime and Criminals* (sel.)\* **2 seminars**
- 21 Martin Luther King, Jr., “Letter from Birmingham Jail”\*; Judith D. Hoover, “Reconstruction of the Rhetorical Situation in ‘Letter from Birmingham Jail’”\*; **1 seminar**
- 23 In-class test
- 28 George Jackson, *Soledad Brother* (sel.)\*; Mumia Abu-Jamal, *Live from Death*

- Row (sel.)\*; Dylan Rodríguez, *Forced Passages: Imprisoned Radical Intellectuals and the U.S. Prison Regime* (sel.)\* **1 seminar**
- 30 John Edgar Wideman, *Brothers and Keepers*; **2 seminars**
- Nov 4 “‘Docile bodies shuffling in unison’: The Prisoner as Worker in Canadian Prison Writing”\*
- 6 James Tyman, *Inside Out: An Autobiography of a Native Canadian*; Deena Rymhs, *From the Iron House: Imprisonment in First Nations Writing* (sel.)\*; **2 seminars**
- 11 Remembrance Day, No Classes
- 13 Judee Norton, “Norton #59900”\*, “Arrival”\*; Patricia McConnel, “Sing Soft, Sing Loud”\*; **2 seminars; Annotated Bibliography and Essay Proposal due**
- 18 TBA
- 20 Breyten Breytenbach, *True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist* (sel.)\*, “The Double Dying of an Ordinary Prisoner,”\* “The Man with the Head”\*; **2 seminars**
- 25 *Oz* episode, viewing
- 27 *Oz* discussion; review
- Dec. 2 In-class test

**Research Essay Due December 9th by 4:00 pm.**

### Grading Scale

Mark Range (/100)	Grade	Range	Grade
90-100	A+	67-69	C+
85-89	A	63-66	C
80-84	A-	60-62	C-
77-79	B+	57-59	D+
73-76	B	53-56	D
70-72	B-	50-52	D-
		0-49	F

Please note: the D- and D+ grades are used for information purposes only; the University transcript does not include D- or D+ grades, so any final grade in the D range will appear as a simple “D”.