He is a professor at Chico State for the English Department and he also works for the First Year Experience Department and he is the Book in Common's first speaker and a series for speakers. And I would like everybody to help in welcoming him to, for his lecture so. Thank you.
**Dr. Nathaniel Bryant:** Before I get started I would like to thank a few people. CSU Chico's First Year Program, and the Book in Common Committee, everyone whose organized this and invited me to come and give this talk, my colleagues in the English Department at Chico State, the residents of this State of California who make public education possible. I really want to actually thank convicts and prisoners whose written work, past and present, dead and alive--whose work I have written about and will speak about today. You, the audience for attending a talk on Friday afternoon!
The title of my talk today is the contours of US prison writing or what we should talk about when we talk about prison writing. I just want to give a little bit of background on myself by the way an introduction.
My dissertation was on US prison writing from 1929-2007. This is the title of it through the University of Pittsburgh. In this dissertation as specifically looked at non-literary forms of US prison writing of genres and modes of discourse that don't get enough critical tension in literary studies. And in this study I made an argument that all these forms of writing are intellectual labor and should be read as such. Examine the kinds of thinking and modes of composition, methods of composition and circulation of that these writers undertook. And these are sort of brief chapter descriptions here.
Whether they completed scientific research in the case of Robert Stroud, better known as the birdman of Alcatraz, functioned a self-educated lawyers.
In the case of Caryl Chessman whose a California example, engaged in polemical and pedagogical letter writing.
Such as George Jackson were crafted and revised personal essays and testimonial writing.
In the case of the York Correctional Institution writers group that Wally Lamb and novelists sort of and helped publish. That was my dissertation in a nutshell, right? You'll never have to ask me about it again, that's fine. If you want we can talk about it during the Q&A a little bit more. Just a quick word about this presentation, it moves in two sections.
Part one and part two. In part one, I take up prison writing as a whole, what constitutes the field of prison writing as I see it. Part two briefly takes up the history of prison literature before concentrating mainly on US prison literature. What I hope to do for you today is to sort of situate or conceptualize what prison literature is. Narrowly defined as part of a much broader and varied field of prison writing. So again the subtitle of my talk is, “What we (should) talk about when we talk about ‘prison writing...’”

Part of the reason I use this in the title is because there is a bit of a scholarly debate going on right now about terms like prison literature or prison writing. Something I’m not going to get into now, again we can talk about this during the Q&A if there's any kind of interest. But suffice it to say when we discussed prison in English departments we usually refer to the literature produced by certain prisoners, poetry, fiction, memoirs, autobiographies, letters, and those sort of things. I come from a composition and rhetoric background as well as a literary criticism background and so I prefer the much more inclusive term prison writing. But I want to unpack what that term means and kind of map it out a bit. So this is a really hastily done and completely unscientific graphic representation of what I use.
What I mean when I use the term prison writing. At the top is prison literature. The kind of writing privilege by literary scholars, it's literature by prisoners and usually about prison. Perhaps it would be more appropriate to call this prisoner literature or convict literature to reflect who does the actual writing. There are many fine pieces which I am going to talk about a little later. But as you can see that which gets the most critical attention actually often obscures the many other kinds of writing, everyday writing produced in prisons that fall outside the realm of literature, alright. It's probably useful to think about this, I'm going to give you some key terms and key ideas here. Prisons are discursive institutions.
Not just warehouses and houses of corrections or punishment. This is a concept covered at great length by Michel Foucault in his famous book Discipline and Punish. But for today I actually want to recognize someone who made similar arguments at least a decade before Foucault.
The great Canadian sociologist Erving Goffman was one of the first individuals to actually consider prisons as discursive. In his famous 1961 study entitled Asylums he describes total institutions, the thing that he calls total institutions such as prisons, mental asylums, and hospitals. He observes of these total institutions the paradox that while they "seem the least intellectual of places," their absolute concern "about words and verbalized perspectives has come to play a central and often feverish role" in contemporary society (84). What does he mean by this? Well consider just for one second the sheer variety and amount of writing that goes on in around prisons every day. Aside from the literature produced by prisoners we should consider things as different as psychological profiles and the prisoner’s jacket, his administrative profile detailing his previous record, his crimes, and disciplinary infractions. And like among the other kinds of writing our institutional laws and rules, parole hearings, legal and administrative jargon, euphemisms, warden's reports to the state, prison guard, union endorsements of political candidates, the products of prison classrooms, these are just a handful of the writing genres and modes of writing relating to prison. I would even argue as a heavily tattooed individual that prison tattooing is a legitimate form of writing too, consider the bodies as a text, the tattoos often subversive language against the state.
Or telling a story about the prisoners past, his activity, his allegiances. So what you see here, this is a really graphic example of Russian prisoner tattoo. The cupola's represent different prisons and time that he's done in prison. The figure, the face of Stalin, at one point it was believed that if you have the leaders face's on your body that you actually wouldn't get shot and executed they would have to hang you instead. This is an entire sort of semiotic code of what you've done and where you've been, right? And there's actually four or five different Russian criminal tattoo encyclopedias.
Compiled by a man named Danzig Baldaev who've worked in Soviet prisons for the greater part of the 20th century.

So in privileging prison literature by prisoners to we often overlook all the other kinds of writing published or otherwise that happened in prison. For example this emphasis on prisoner lit excludes guard and warden memoirs as literary texts which is a huge oversight made by everyone including myself. I finally realized this when I was writing the conclusion to my dissertation, a little too late there. But this also includes the categories of everyday writing that happens as part of the work of the institution. Even bans against intellectual activity, prison censorship, rules prohibiting what prisoners read or write, or about the kinds of classes that they are permitted to take, are themselves part of prison discourse in prison writing. This is because these rules governing censorship have often been codified and then or later contested or even litigated afterwards. Prisoners might sue the institution, the warden, or the State to get better access to reading materials which then creates new writing.

Goffman again describes this dynamic: "Each goal lets loose a doctrine, with its own inquisitors and its own martyrs, and within institutions there seems to be no natural check on the license of easy interpretation that follows". In a nutshell what he's saying is that one prison rule eventually produces an entire body of writing in response to that rule. Now at this point you're probably wondering why I'm spending so much time on all these things like all these forms of prison writing the docket talk about from disciplinary tickets, to work orders, to psychological profiles. Again this is because there's actually a lot of writing going on in penal institutions every day believe it or not. But we don't automatically associate prisons in writing or thinking right, these activities that we do. In part because prisons are marked by extreme rates illiteracy on the part of prisoners. You'll rightly hear over the course of this entire year that prisons warehouse the poor, the unemployed, especially
lower-class ethnic and racial minorities African-Americans, Latinos, and Native American people, prisons often warehouse those with drug addictions and the mentally ill. But here's another set of numbers that I want to sort of share with you, another demographic to consider.
Prison illiteracy rates have been estimated anywhere from 60% for adults to 75% for juvenile offenders. This number needs to be adjusted for degrees of literacy. One study by the education is crime prevention from 1997 found that nearly 20% of the prison population is completely illiterate versus only 4% of the rest of the country. So the remainder of the population of prison has some form of literacy, some ability to read and write. Varying degrees of functionality but not that much overall. There’s one more reason why want I to bring up the issue of literacy in particular. This sort of a soapbox timeout in my presentation or my polemical moment right, this is wasn’t a polemical moment. Increased opportunities for education for prisoners have helped decrease recidivism dramatically. But there’s very little interest to get prisoners the opportunity for classes especially in basic literacy skills, literacy skills I’m talking about the whole country not necessarily the state of California. I feel it's absolutely vital that we should closely attend to literacy, education, reading, and writing within prison. If we conceive of literacy especially adult literacy as a kind of intellectual work it may help broader, it may help the broader public to support it as a structural element within the institution. Something that the state must provide and fund. Reading is a learned behavior and can be a difficult proposition for variety of reasons especially as we get older.
The poet and former prison writer or former prisoner, Jimmy Santiago Baca is a famous example. Baca went from being a self-professed functional illiterate to a published poet during five years of incarceration in New Mexico. And his really fantastic memoir A Place to Stand he compares learning to read and improving one's literacy skills to hard physical labor. He was able to start a penpal correspondence with an older man in the community and he used this as a way to learn to write. And this is how he described this letter writing process, "I erased so often and so hard I made holes in the paper. After hours of plodding word by word to write a clear sentence, I would read it and it didn't even come close to what I'd meant to say. After a day of looking up words and writing, I'd be exhausted, as if I had run 10 miles". My students probably feel this way about the things I give them to do and I certainly feel this way about my own writing. But all jokes aside. Imagine for one second trying to teach yourself to read and write in prison as an adult. Baca statement from my perspective is a statement about labor. One that we fundamentally and categorically dismiss if we assume that literacy is a given skill and that the illiterate only have themselves to blame for their inability to read and write. We've actually all experienced what Baca is talking about here at some point in our lives but for most of us that was a long time ago and we've actually forgotten what it took to learn those skills. In essence what I'm trying to say is that if we change the dynamics in conversations about prison education in particular, if we take it back from those who've decided that it represents a privilege to be revoked and instead insist that education is work and therefore a human right not bound or answerable to institutional state policy. Perhaps it will be more support for it as a real component of so-called rehabilitation.
Okay enough with the soapbox alright. On to the good stuff. Prison literature, some of its compositional characteristics, what you should read if you're interested and a little at the end on why we should read it. We have to keep in mind that prison literature is composed in really unique, capacity is not often anything like the way literary work outside the institutions composed. Prohibitions against reading and writing material are almost universal especially among political prisoners.
An illuminating example, one of my favorite for very unfortunate reasons is a story of Antonio Gramsci the Italian Marxist thinker who was arrested and jailed in 1926 by the fascist police. The reason for his arrest was made quite clear when the presiding prosecutor of his case told the court we must prevent this brain, Gramsci’s for functioning for 20 years. They were only partially successful. He produced many notebooks on Italian history and Marxist theory and wrote an amazing number of letters. But he also endured a strictly enforced letter writing schedule, the maintenance of poorly stock prison libraries and the willful neglect of the declining health by prison state doctors, among many other forms of oppression. And this, the suppression even translates down to the thing that he used to write with, his pens. The writing material provided to him by the state was often such poor condition that he had to stop writing because it required an exertion that he could not physically manage given his weaken state. He ends one letter by complaining, "Writing has become a physical torment too because they give me horrible nibs that scrape the paper and demand an obsessive attention to the mechanical aspects of writing. I thought I might be able to obtain the permanent use of a pen and I had planned to write the studies that I mentioned; but I did not receive the necessary permit and don’t like to insist". So what he’s actually calling attention to is the political motive behind giving him a crappy pen right. Doing so forces him to focus almost exclusively on the actual process of writing on the active inscription rather than on the content which distracts and frustrating him. And the only way around this problem is to submit voluntarily to the bureaucracy of the prison by filling out an application to request better material which is in itself another diversion right. Filling out applications rather than working on my notebooks. And these requests as we know can be arbitrarily approved or rejected. And eventually by writing letters to the institution he recognizes and validates the state’s power over him too. So you can’t even take basic writing material for granted in prison. This is sort of a dramatically exhibited by the composition of other notable works.
The Kenyan novelist and playwright Ngugi wa Thiong’o began a novel on toilet paper. Another talks about writing his novel on the paper inside boxes of cigarettes that he had to collect from prisoners. And in rare cases novels are sometimes written in the margins of already published work. In a forward to his prison memoir The Man Died, a Nigerian writer and eventual Nobel Prize winner Wole Soyinka describes how he wrote a novel in the margins even the tiny spaces between lines in a published book that we was allowed to keep in his cell. And perhaps most dramatically of all, and I always screw this name up so forgive me if I butcher it.
Pramoedya Ananta Toer who was not allowed a pencil or paper and who was largely kept in solitary confinement for two years in Indonesia began the composition of two different novels in prison by orally communicating them to fellow prisoners. Who then told the stories to other people who had pens and paper who then finally committed them to writing them. So think about composing two different novels through an elaborate game of prison telephone alright. Okay so among the many genres that makeup prison writing I like to highlight the letter or epistle. Letters are particularly interesting because they are the most likely to find their way outside the institution.
Writing and receiving letters are heavily monitored by the institution. Many prison writers discuss the joy they feel when receiving letters and the devastation they endure when such privileges are revoked. Letters represent a direct link to the outside world and are often the means by which prison conditions and practices are articulated for the world outside. And because of this, prisoners administrators are always quick to limit, lose these sort of euphemisms, letters written to and from prisoners. But despite their attempts numerous volumes of letters have been published because the individual letter is itself a rather difficult thing to monitor. Produce and often disseminated by means of the unofficial underlife of the institution to use Goffman's phrase. Letters are relatively easy to hide, transport, and smuggle, and they often test the soft ragged edges of what we usually think of as total institutions. They reveal the exploitable gaps in administrative practices sometimes even the physical gaps and breaches that have been overlooked by prison authorities. And it is in this sense that letters become a side of contestation between writer and state or writer and institution. And as well as Soyinka eloquently puts it "A breach is worth all in confinement". Prison literature itself is a really broad category, extends a long way back. If we use a more inclusive understanding of prison literature that includes worse written by those who were imprisoned at some point the listener is even longer. So if there’s any English majors or literature folk in the crowd it might be useful for you to consider just how much of the cannon of Western literature actually relates to in some form or another imprisonment.
Some examples. Miguel de Cervantes author of Don Quixote was a former prisoner and a slave of Algerian pirates until he was ransom back to his family in Spain, experiences that he later wrote about.
The English writer Sir Thomas Mallory compiler of L' Morte d' Arthur, Arthurian legends is famously referred to as a night prisoner. Around 524 the Roman philosopher Boethius wrote Consolation of Philosophy during the year he spent in prison for treason something he would later be executed as a result of. If we're to believe the historicity of the New Testament some of the apostles were jailed too and of course the New Testament is whether fictional or not, about one of most famous criminals in all Western civilization namely the figure of Christ.
The famous Christian allegory The Pilgrim's Progress published in 1685 was written by John Bunyan who was repeatedly arrested because he preached a different kind of faith than that of England. And in France the libertine Marquis de Sade bounced around prisons and insane asylums all across the country pending philosophical and pornographic novels like Justine and 120 days in Sodom. In total he spent more than 30 years of life in some form of incarceration. I could keep listing them, right? It just keeps going back but I think you get the point.
So we finally made it to American prison writing the reason why you’re really here, right. US prison writing has rather a complicated origin too. It might be better to think of the earliest writings not as prison writing per se but instead maybe to call them captivity narratives. Perhaps the earliest is a long narrative poem dating back from the 1680s by a man named James Revel. And this is entitled The Poor, Unhappy Transported Felon. The early colonies especially Georgia where one place that Europe sends there criminals. And Revel describes what that transportation across the ocean was like and eventually sort of describes in poetic form his life as a penal servant. It cannot be understated to how important slavery is to the genre of captivity narratives and to question and the questions of incarceration. The intersection between slavery and imprisonment gave us many important works from the colonial period through the convict leasing period that occurred after the Civil War. Including titles like the interesting narrative of Olaudah Equiano, the Narrative of Life of Frederick Douglass, Solomon Northup’s 12 Years of Slave, and one that I find most compelling Harriet Jacob’s Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl. Finally to there was during the early colonial period an entire category of writing called Indian captivity narratives, stories usually detailing how white settlers were and colonists were eventually sort of kidnapped and adopted by Native American tribes and then they found their way back. And the most important is by Mary Rollinson from 1682. Perhaps the single most important early American document regarding incarceration is not written by a prisoner at all however it is the plan for the American prison itself.
Modern penitentiaries roughly 230 years old dating back to Philadelphia physician Benjamin Rush in 1787 public speech address that he gave at Ben Franklin's house entitled, An Enquiry into the Effects of Public Punishments upon Criminals, and Upon Society. This is a political document in which Rush outlines the need to remove the punishable body as the center of public spectacle and relocate it to a private institution. Preferably this institution should be remote in location and hard to access its immediate environment whether in the mountains or surrounded by great swamps. It should be gloomy, it should be physically imposing as well. Rush writes, "Let its doors be of iron; and let the grating, occasioned by opening and shutting them, be increased by an echo from a neighboring mountain that shall extend and continue a sound that shall deeply pierce the soul". This is sort of like the worst Gothic clichés, right. The inside of this institution should be justice for bidding. The flow of information and people is to be strictly guarded and the guards themselves should uniformly be frightening. But all the officers of the house be strictly forbidden ever to discover any signs of mirth or even levity in the presence of their criminals, they can't smile, they can't laugh, and neither can the prisoners. It should bear a weighty and dainty title. And this is I think the most interesting thing and scary, he imagines this place should be used to terrorize small children. This is a long quote here, he says "I cannot conceive anything more calculated to diffuse terror through a community, and thereby to prevent crimes, that the combination of the three circumstances that have been mentioned in punishments. Children will press upon the evening fire in listening to the tales that will be spread from this abode of misery. Superstition will add to its horrors, and romance will find in it ample materials for fiction, which cannot fail of increasing the terror of its punishments".

So the first scared straight program in this country actually goes all the way back to 1787, right. That's one way to think about it, he wants children to be terrorized, he wants community to be terrorized by this idea of prison. Prison writing itself doesn't really take
off until the later part of the 19th century because the institution itself is evolving, right, it's relatively new. Most of the people that go there are illiterate or have varying degrees of education and the like. Apart from many of the slave narratives that I just named earlier another highlight from the mid-19th century is English novelist Charles Dickinson's travelogue American Notes which he wrote after traveling around the US to promote many of his novels. In his chapter on Philadelphia he meditates for a long time on his visit to Eastern State Penitentiary which he found abhorrent, cruel, and unusual. Eastern state if you don't know is actually the person that is modeled on Benjamin Rush's plan, right. It still exists as a museum. If you ever find yourself in Philadelphia I highly recommend going to see it. 20th century prison writing can be roughly divided into three periods.
And I'm totally oversimplifying a lot of this, right. The first is dominated by a boom in prison writing that attempted to capture prison life in a more realistic way. This happened mainly through the publication of memoir nonfiction. Two notable examples are Alexander Berkman's Pittsburgh-based Prison Memoirs of an Anarchist and Robert Elliott Burns his 1932 memoir I'm a Fugitive from a Chain Gang, the letter actually got turned into movie. We also see an emerging category of fictionalized accounts of prison life written in the literary modes of realism and naturalism. As a movement 19th century realism sought to depict life as it really is by telling fictional stories about characters that reflected the lives of its middle and upper-class readership. But around the turn of the century realism starts to have a sort of rougher edge depicting life among workers in the underclasses. The fiction was starting to be set in places like factories, mills, and jails. Prisoners themselves began to get published more frequently too. And this strain of realism I would argue is still one of the more dominant trends in prison writing today partly because we expect it to be that way. We expect to read about prison sex, gang violence, drug addiction, the cedar sides of prison life and were actually often disappointed when we don't get it. Or when there work frustrates our expectations and preconceived notions about prison life. If you've read Piper Kerman's Orange is the New Black right she actually sort of frustrates you in saying I've never had prison sex but the television show is full of lesbian sex, right. So it's a kind of expectation that we bring to these text's, that's problematic too.
Notable writers who wrote in this sort of mode of realism, hard realism include Chester Himes on the right here originally from Ohio. His first novel Cast the First Stone from the 1950s was heavily censored because it was one of the first to frankly discuss a homosexual relationship in prison that was not framed by some moralizing tone, right it just these things happen. And another that writes in this mode is Jack London. If the first movement in 20th century prison writing is dominated by the emergence of realism than increased radicalism and increased literary and this marked the second period. I'm oversimplifying things again but this period from the beginning of the 60s to the mid-70s is dominated by two figures on either end of it, Malcolm X and George Jackson.
One critic argues that contemporary prison literature can be dated from the autobiography of Malcolm X whereas another contempt is that death of George Jackson on the yard at San Quentin was the most dramatic and revealing event in history of contemporary American prison writing especially for the aftereffects things like Attica right. Malcolm X and Jackson have obtained a near mythic reputation since their deaths in part because they provided models for how to live and respond to racist and class based oppression. Both understood that they, were in their own way, looked upon as role models and mentors in the black community and thus had to embody and intact the revolutionary ideals. Other notable works in this period include Eldridge Cleaver's controversial collection of letters entitled Soul on Ice.
And memoirs by black women revolutionaries Angela Davis and Assata Shakur. This period that I just kind of described and I'm still talking about a little bit is the absolute high point I think in terms of literary production in prison. This is partly because prison themselves prompted this work. A number including San Quentin experimented with novel rehabilitative programs especially those geared toward increased education and literacy and this in turn produced greater numbers of people who wanted to write. One of the most important is a California novelist Malcolm Braly whose novel On the Yard.
Is for my money perhaps the best novel ever to be produced inside an American prison and actually happens to be one of the best novels to be written during the 1960s and I'll fight anyone who argues otherwise. The cast of characters is immense and reflects in many ways the period of California incarceration just before the emergence of the civil rights movement. So it's an interesting slice of prison life and prison history because the civil rights movement as you probably know had tremendous impacts on US prisons in general. Perhaps the most influential poet to emerge from US prisons is Etheridge Knight, he served as a medic in the Korean War was wounded and became addicted to morphine. He would serve nearly a decade for armed robbery in support of his addictions and while he was in prison he began to experiment with poetry and even had a volume of poems published. The one that you see here. He would eventually be released and became a major poet of the black arts movement. So that's the kind of middle period.

The third movement or third period is kind of where we are today, right. If these 15 or 20 years between Malcolm X and George Jackson saw increase in the politicization of prisoners and a boom in prison writing in general. That which marks the sort of latter half or two and a half decades of its 20 century can be seen only as a very sharp decline. Part of this is entirely political, all the increased militancy that we saw during the 60s and the early part of the 70s that helped to protect the rights of prisoners got rolled back in a major way piece by piece. For example prisoners used to be able to apply for Pell grants for the purpose of taking college courses and earning degrees. That was stopped for good in 1994 and we're only sort of now revisiting that question today. The most sad thing I think recently that has happened is the US Supreme Court case from 2006 entitled, beard and banks, which ruled that all reading material that is not legal or religious in nature may be withheld from certain prisoners as indefinitely as a form of punishment. So the only things that are, you can only keep things that are constitutionally protected everything else can be taken away and withheld until you stop acting up. Nevertheless the novel works have been
sort of published in this kind of rollback period. The best drama to emerge that I think again and I would fight over it, is New York and poet and playwright Miguel Pinero's Short Eyes, a powerful drama that would win an Obie.
And would eventually be turned into a movie. Pinero wrote this play in 1974 based on his own experience as well in prison and various New York detention facilities especially Sing Sing. And was actually first performed and sort of exercised by two performer prisoners. The dialogue is witty, sharp, and multilingual, reflecting the racial makeup of New York prisons. The main characters are black and Puerto Rican. The title itself is derived from the relative inability of most Spanish speakers or some Spanish speakers to pronounce short heist, I have trouble saying it, the prison term for a child molester. I'm not going to say anymore because I'm actually teaching this at Butte College and I don't want to give away the ending so I highly recommend that you read it.

Jack Henry Abbott's collection of letters to the novelist Norman Mailer is another important moment in prison writing but mostly for the wrong reasons. In his letters Abbott, a self-educated prisoner takes up a number of issues such as the repressive nature of prison administration, the open racism of the system, and a relative inability to adjust to society after living in prison. Mailer and a lot of other celebrities would agitate for Abbott's release based on the strength of the book that was published of his letters but within a few weeks after this release in 1981 he was rearrested for fatally stabbing a man in a fight. And Abbott's name since that moment is always sort of coming up as shorthand by law and order conservatives to disparage or dismiss prison writing, right. Abbott is the guy that always gets brought up as, this is what happens when you listen to prisoners and you trust them. I'm going to quickly mention four more contemporary works that you should also read if you're interested and then kind of end my talk.
Mumia Abu-Jamal is a prolific writer. Perhaps his most powerful work is still his first, *Live from Death Row*. If you are interested you can actually also find a number of radio shows that he has done in addition to his books. In 2000 the Native American political prisoner Leonard Peltier published his memoir *Prison Writings: My Life as My Sundance* which details life on a poor reservation in many ways a form of captivity itself and it also details the struggles as an indigenous prisoner and a political prisoner today. Perhaps the best memoir about guarding prison was published by Ted Conover in 2001 called *Newjack* and it represents life on the other side of the prison door of the people who do prison time in eight hour stretches and also bear similar social stigma to the people that they are guarding. Finally Angela Davis’s small but powerful abolitionist techs or prison obsolete provokes us to think about the title question which I think is a very necessary and fruitful one to ask ourselves these days.
There is obviously a lot more to be said about this, I'm just going to cut it off here because I feel like I more than adequately sketched out this map. This broad map of US prison writing, I would like to leave some time for questions. If you're interested I cobbled together a greatest hits list of literary titles, and social titles, and literary criticism that you should check out and I got copies down here. I'll say this by way of conclusion, prison writing is important this is because prison literature itself is one of the few ways that prisoners themselves can speak back in individual and collective ways through the oppression that they experience on a daily basis. It's important to note that no one ever set out to be the great prison novelist. As Max Nelson put it no writer ever intends to produce prison literature nevertheless the work that is done there needs to be read and we should listen to the voices to try to understand what they're saying.
The Great Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoyevsky who was a prisoner himself at one point said "The degree of civilization in society can be judged by entering its prisons". I'll add that the writing produced in prison is another useful measuring stick for how far we've come and how far we still have to go. And honestly and I've read a lot of this stuff, it's crystal clear that we have a long long long way to go in this country. Thank you very much.

[Audience applause]
Audience Member: Well my question, goes back to your statement about realism and you seem to suggest that we come to prison writing with expectations of realism. Maybe it would be more accurate to say that we come to prison writing with a specific kind of realism like you know it's not just [inaudible] realism. But it's like we're looking for a kind of certain esthetic, we're looking for drama, we're looking for maybe a narrative of triumph or whatever. But it seems like it's a specific kind of those. Maybe you could talk a little bit more about that.

Dr. Nathaniel Bryant: Sure the way that I sometimes sort of pose this question is you know like I said in my talk we want to read prison literature for the dirty bits and for the salacious bits right. Imagine trying to read a prison novel that's realistic written from the perspective of somebody who's in permanent lockdown for 23 and half hours a day. That is an entirely different kind of mode of writing, right, one that would frustrate us to but also reflects I think a dynamic reality of what we're talking about in prison. So these expectations I think in some way really shape, they both reflect what is already going on in prison, right, anyway. But then that kind of creates a system in which writers feel compelled to describe prison rape, drug abuse all that sort of thing you know what I mean.

Audience Member: My argument is that our expectations are actually influencing the writing itself.

Dr. Nathaniel Bryant: I think so. Yeah.

Audience Member: And in a way that limits the imagination of the writer.

Dr. Nathaniel Bryant: In some ways. I think that's a fair.
Audience Member: On the other hand I think it is kind of interesting that, you know, I was going to try and figure out an example of prison writing that would be non-realistic or I wouldn't accord to realism in some ways. All I could do is I could think of like moments where you would have the writer leap out of realism and then you would note those and maybe put pressure on those in your reading.

Dr. Nathaniel Bryant: Okay so I'll give you an example that actually sort of casts a lot of what I said about Jack London in sort of a different light. He publishes in 1914 a novel called The Star Rover which is written from the perspective of somebody who is currently waiting in solitary confinement in a straitjacket and then starts to astral project himself back in the past. So he imagines himself at the massacre, sort of a Mormon massacre in history, he imagine he's at the execution of Jesus, internal, right. And so like all of the chapters are devoted to these different moments in the past but you have to take that leap with him that he's like he's actually projecting himself that. And so like that actually is published right in that moment where it said most of the literature is marked by realism with a capital R, right. And he for the most part is a realistic or naturalistic writer which seems a really strange thing for him to do. So that's the one that kind of comes to mind when I think about if we are not necessarily only worried about depicting the inside of the institution, the capacity for prisoners to write different stories or different narratives.

Audience Member: Yeah thanks for these are really great. I just want to make a comment about you know how you were growing the inherent politicalness of prison writing. Because you know there is danger for many I think who don't spend their time in thinking, reading, and writing about this stuff to think that prison writing is something that happens in these exceptional ways and these books that are published and these movies that are made etc. And I just want to share that as somebody who spent five years going to
California prisons on a regular basis. It was very obvious that part of what it means to be not politically active in some radical way when you're inside prison but just simply to be somebody who is not taking abuse lying down, that makes you politically accurate. Has mediate consequences of losing, especially for you losing things like paper and pen. And the thousands of ways in which within a correctional setting, all your rights can be removed in a way where you can't even appeal them in any way that is going to bring you results. So just to make the context one of, it's everyday right. I mean there's a sense in which incarceration is inherently a political act for a thousand reasons and when it comes to this aspect of writing, if you show a small will in terms of trying to be communicative about that it's immediately [inaudible].

Dr. Nathaniel Bryant: Mumia Abu-Jamal sort of publishes about, in one of his other books, the fact that many of the people that you'll find in solitary confinement or in these sort of secure housing units. Some are gang-related, some are violent, some mentally ill but you also have a lot of jailhouse lawyers there who through their own intellectual endeavors and labor are trying to agitate on behalf of other people. And so one way that the prison administrators sort of shut that down is to simply take them away, bury them beneath the rock, and sort of cut off all kinds of communication, strip them of their work. So if we think about beard versus banks this is the ruling that particularly pertains to people in sort of lock-down states right. I can take away all their books that are not constitutionally protected in order to modify their behavior. If a lot of those people are jailhouse lawyers they're taking away the material they have and can use to sort of agitate on behalf of other people. So it's a kind of perpetual cycle right. So that is why I think telling a story of Gramsci sort of having to focus on the actual act of inscription is an important one that we shouldn't sort of take lightly.

Audience Member: Two part question. I really liked your reminder that we need to think
about, because in writing like as a larger concept of deciding if it is literature and so first of all is that something that scholars have access too. Through freedom of information like do you have access to the kind of administrative writing. And the second part of that is if you do is there as the kind of role of prisons and philosophies and political ideas about prisons changed in America can you try to change in that writing throughout the 20th century.

**Dr. Nathaniel Bryant:** That's a really good question. The farther back you go in history I think it's a little easier to access certain things. So Caryl Chessman the jailhouse lawyer that I mentioned and wrote about in my dissertation produced a number of his own writs and a number of writs on behalf of everyone else. And through legal archives I could actually get my hands on the finished products of those, of that work right. I think it's is a little harder if you don't have access to institution if you are not teaching in particular, to just like walk up to the gate and say hey can I talk with your inmates. I haven't done a lot of that work in terms of contemporary prison writing, the everyday stuff that I mentioned just because I for many different reasons don't have access in that way. One of the things that I would like to do if I were to ever revise my dissertation and that's an open question is to sort of think about the ways that guards and administration have a life outside the institution that allow for their ideas to circulate more broadly as a kind of writing that have certain political effects in the world right. And we kind of, we, when we privilege only the convict writing and prisoner writing we obscure those things and the things that we obscure often have a political life that means a lot on convicts themselves. Can you remind me the second part of your question?

**Audience Member:** So I figured you probably didn't have a ton of access but it would be interesting if you like if someone could see physiologically write ups of prisoners across the 20th century like how their kind of language by practitioners within prisons may or may not change.
Dr. Nathaniel Bryant: So at one point at San Quentin in the 40s, 50s, and early 60s the librarian there whose last name is Spector, I think it's Herman Spector had created this thing called bibliotherapy where in addition to collecting information this sort of regular jacket he also had them write essays, he had to write short stories, and he collected all that. And it was a fantastic gigantic archive. Malcolm Braley is a product of this situation. Chessman sort of comes up against it, you have other people cycling in and out they're kind of on the margins like Merle Haggard, right. When he retires his position as prison librarian is vacated. They hire another guard in place of it and they destroy the archive. And I think that is sort of a telling moment and one that I kind of keep coming up against in terms of all the people that I've written about and want to work on. It's like how can I reconstruct this archive that was so rich in terms of what the expectations of the institution itself but also what the prison writers did. So their interviews and their things like that but it's sort of like reconstituting something that just went up in smoke. Which I think is exceptionally sad. That would of been a really rich thing, the mind, and sort of talk about the way that, Malcolm Braly's sort of talks about this in his autobiography of playing the system, right. I produce these things to get published in magazines about like health and then sneaks his novel through which is full of drugs and sex and everything else. And so he kind of establishes this way of playing what Spector wants and publishing that and then Spector doesn't have time to read everything so he just gets all of his other stuff published as a result too. So that's just kind of dynamic moment that I like regret for everybody working on this, I think that would've been an interesting moment to sort of dissect and take a look at.

Audience Member: So during your presentation [Inaudible], works that have almost a list of grievances [Inaudible], to problems and systems through your readings have you ever discovered there's that solutions and alternatives that have either been theorized or tested to impose these issues?
Dr. Nathaniel Bryant: That comes up a lot in published collections of letters. So like George Jackson's letters are often about not only attempting to sort of frame his political ideas his political theories but also talk about forming revolution behind bars. I actually found out the day that a piece that I'm working on is about, might be published on Jackson and what I talk about is he uses letters to teach so that then becomes published as a collection. Abbot's letters do the same thing. I think somebody like Davis who experienced incarceration early in her life and career and then is now spent the rest of her career trying to dismantle that, talks a lot about that but that's not published or written in prison, right. I just think that likelihood of something, the likelihood of something like that getting through all of the cards, the prison sensors, through the walls, outside, it's just really unlikely. It happens and the letter is a vehicle for that but I don't think that's a small part of I think the bigger thing of prison writing than I'm describing.

Audience Member: Kind of more off a journey you talked about you touched on guard's kind of being like a gatekeeper or what about information gets out of prisons into the outside world. Do you know of any writing that come from the perspective of prison guards? Is that something that exists or is it kind of frowned upon?

Dr. Nathaniel Bryant: It does and one of, and so there's one called, the title sort of escaped me I should of had this on the list. But I came across recently, written from the perspective of a woman prison guard and kind of not only the race issues and the kind of sort of violence that she encounters but also gender issues, administration, prisoner, and all sort of stuff like that. Conover is interesting because he is only there for a year and originally he wrote the book partly because he wanted to write a book just too sort of talk about it and he wasn't allowed to interview anybody so he joined up for a year. In the 40s and 50s and early 60s you see a lot of prison guard and particular prison warden memoirs and autobiographies. A lot in California, warden Duffy was at San Quentin, has published three
or four books. So it's there. It doesn't get nearly as much attention and I think that's a
shame to because these people you know do volunteer their lives to work in a system that
oppresses everybody, right, and they bare a lot of social stigma as well. They don't talk
about it. A lot of the people that Conover worked with talks you know, they lie about their
jobs, they have stresses that they have to deal with you know they are free and they
volunteered but as soon as you start that work it really sort of degrades you. A lot of
people have mental health issues and divorce rates are pretty high among guards. But in
total I don't think there's nearly as much depicting that side of life as there are prison, like
from the prisoner’s perspective.

**Audience Member:** There's a really great documentary called Corrections that follows a co-
part of prison guards being trained. And the first day of training somehow this guy Michael
M. actually got access to the training and he goes in and films them during the training and
he's very talented and we see how correctional officers are trained and then he follows
them six months into their jobs as well. So you get a very interesting side. So try and maybe
get to it, talk to you later I got a copy.

**Audience Member:** I'm taking notes not texting.

**Audience Member:** Nathan thanks for your talk it really [Inaudible]. And I also dropped by
to a quotation that you also talked about from the templet from the 17th century maybe.
That is about the ways that prison was designed to be loud in order to induce that kind of
terror.

**Dr. Nathaniel Bryant:** Yeah so it's designed to be loud on the outside.

**Audience Member:** Oh okay.
Dr. Nathaniel Bryant: But not on the inside. The inside is totally in for silence. You cannot speak, you cannot mumble, you cannot laugh, so the outside itself is the kind of gothic castle. The inside is something else entirely.

Audience Member: [Inaudible]. So that changes my question because I was going to say no one in the intervening time would think that maybe prisons are being quieter now. I mean prison is a kind of space for quiet and reflection. And in fact there is a number reports from Atlantic and all kinds of places that suggest that the noise in prison is itself a form of torture.

Dr. Nathaniel Bryant: Yup, yeah. I mean what is interesting is this plan Rush talks about goes in great detail and great length in the plan about the need for silence. They can’t have reading material except the Bible, they must work in their cells, they are lockdown, we need to kind of experiment on them to understand what pain is because he is also a medical physician. We haven’t actually moved much beyond that, right. The first prison is based on his plan, we’re in for silence, right. And Eastern state when prisoners left their cells they were made to wear black sack cloth around their head so that they couldn’t see what was going on and were transported in that way. This is something that Dickens observes, right. A crushed man, and that’s why we got rid of the silent system. And now we swung entirely the opposite way so that the sort of noise as torture, noise as terror is a constituent part of contemporary imprisonment, right. But in many other ways like secure housing when they are on lockdown 23 1/2 hours a day, he’s already talking about that in 1787. In the 60s you have a number of people in Philadelphia working, experimenting on prisoners against their will. So this is a city in which he said we need to find out what pain is and then 200 years later it actually happens on the same population.

Audience Member: [Inaudible], when you know about how writing gets done?
Dr. Nathaniel Bryant: I can't. I mean that's why I think like calling attention to the fact that it's sort of a marvel that writing is done in any capacity. We should understand it is as a discursive of institution, there's this much writing done in any given moment in any prison in spite of the noise, in spite of all these comings and goings, right. So.

Audience Member: I just have a quick comment to respond to the question before, if you're interested in reading about grievances, what they're about, what kind of logic is used, what kind of ways prisoners argue for their rights. You might want to look at Appealing to Justice by Kitty Calavita and Val Jenness. You can also talk to me because I did a project on grievances in woman's prisons.

Audience Member: That is another good point actually like the whole gender question. Many of your examples are men. I mean we can navigate on that.

Dr. Nathaniel Bryant: So that was something that came out directly in the sort of composition of my dissertation. A lot of women commenting on prison writing, note that men have a long sort of past history and tradition to drawn on. Especially now, contemporary, you can draw back on a George Jackson or Malcolm X or people like that. You do have a certain handful of women who are agitating inside and outside were very militant. But a lot of the writing that is done I think by women is much more every day about grievances about you know trying to rectify that their particular situation on any given moment. That also means it's a lot easier to dismiss, right, to reject, not to listen to, to just sort of take lightly, treat lightly, treat it as an ephemera. And so you know we have anthologies emerging, collecting women prison testimonials and things like that. But there's not as much literature per se done by prison women.

Audience Member: [Inaudible]
Dr. Nathaniel Bryant: Yeah, so. I mean it's, the gender is an interesting question for a lot of different reasons. The prison itself takes its model, young men. So health issues, reproductive rights, all the things are sort of like they represent a lot of different questions that need to be sort of reckoned with. Like most prison administrators just don't have the capacity to do that.

Audience Member: I remember what it's like to just have you finish your dissertation. You're absolutely aiming it. But you have to, one you have to promise us to give us a talk on your dissertation, right.

Audience Member: I want to hear more about [Inaudible], like how do you even approach this?

Audience Member: I mean okay let's just hear it. Are you going to do it?

Dr. Nathaniel Bryant: I can. I can't do that now.

Audience Member: Secondly, I was, I found myself thinking when you were talking about some you know, like the journalistic style of writing. One of my all-time favorites is Wilbert Rideau the editor of The Angolite. A really great publication for decades actually still coming out of the Angola prison. And he was somebody who was in for some violent crime, I think it was murder and he sort of started writing. And he ended up producing these incredible award winning, he has won national American awards for journalism etc. And I found myself wondering how you think of the journalistic writing of you know as compared to all the other forms of regular fictional, the autobiographical, and I know nothing about this. I have always wondered why were those writings aren't staples in the academy.
Dr. Nathaniel Bryant: Yeah so the short answer is at one point when I was thinking and planning my dissertation one of the chapters would've been on the work of sort of jail house reporters, right. Rideau, Red Hog who is a California writer sort of in the late 80s and early 90s published a lot of things in newspapers. The title of the piece Prison Legal News right, this sort of in-house journal for prisoners across the country. I wanted to take a look at that as work to sort of see, understand their compositional sort of questions and constraints but also to think about how this work circulates inside and outside an institution. I realized that was a monumental undertaking and so I cut it and I gathered a few resources, I read the books of the collected work of Rideau. There's a couple of nice anthologies but I didn't get very far into that project because I think it's unique, right. The Angolite is a particular institution, it requires things from Angola that a lot of other institutions just are not willing to allow. Which is actually quite surprising given it's a Deep South prison farm right and they have these sort of award-winning journalist on staff. But I realized that was just too much work, right. I already had to teach myself how to research the law and read the law and that was a year. You know I had to do a lot of other work in terms of relearning how to approach text and write about text and think about text. I just felt like I couldn't add one more chapter. So that would be question mark for the future.

Audience Member: How did you come up with this research?

Dr. Nathaniel Bryant: Never been to jail so I just want to clear the air. Like that's not surprising people see the big tattoos and I'm Pennsylvanian and assume something, right. I had family members a long time ago that had been to prison. I don't have any sort of personal connection to it. I actually came about through work in class studies. I'm from a working-class family, it's through luck mostly that more of my family didn't arrive in this institution at some point. And so that was the first question like not even working-class scholars really talk about prison which is strange I think. The second was actually more sort
of in line with like thinking of literature, American literature, you know. I realized that the very first realist text, Life in the Iron Mills, has a prisoner eventually dying in a jail cell, he is a worker. And then you start tracing that threat throughout realism and naturalism and I just wondered why. What is it about this institution that can naturally gravitate, workers naturally kind of gravitate towards this thing, this prison. And so I started reading more and realized its natural crisis, right. We tend to use the word crisis in academia a lot without really understanding what that word means. And so that just kind of, that's where it came from.

Audience Member: Could you comment on whether changes in technologies of writing have effected prison writing. I was so struck by that you know description of the nib and how difficult it was to write and I'm thinking well nobody writes that way anymore. We all have keyboards, we all computer internet. I know that's not totally available in prisons but it must be to some percentage of the population.

Dr. Nathaniel Bryant: It is. I mean I think it's really uneven and you know access to the Internet, access to computers. I actually gave a talk in Scotland in a conference on reading and writing prison and they were talking. Some of the sort of local folks were talking about having filmmaking classes in prison and giving the cameras and computers and that just kind of blew my mind because that is something like they had enough trust to just let them film things in prison kind of walking around and that's like whoa. America's never going to get that far, right. The work that's being done in prison as actual labor, I mean we have call centers now fielding calls, we have data entry. So that kind of work and that kind of writing is actually fully integrated with like modern technology, consumer technology in odd ways, right. I don't really know beyond that, I mean I know it's uneven. Certain prisoners have been allowed either surreptitiously or I guess by the institution to blog they usually get shut down pretty quickly after a while, right. But beyond that I'm not really sure.
Dr. Nathaniel Bryant: Sorry I'm a righty, I tend to like.

Audience Member: [Inaudible]

Dr. Nathaniel Bryant: I'm going to check that out, I didn't know that. So excellent. Other questions?

Audience Member: [Inaudible], really soon?

Dr. Nathaniel Bryant: No. I have very little aspiration to publish and that's partly, I mean this was a slog for me. And I don't know how to revise it and mark it in a way that would make sense. I mean compositionist kind of recognize what I'm doing, literary people don't even want to listen to it because it's not about literature, it's labor studies but it's not really because it's intellectual labor. So it's just like in this weird space in terms of discipline that just doesn't fit anybody's model, you know what I mean.

Audience Member: We're going to ride you on that one and go for it. You're not getting away with that.

Dr. Nathaniel Bryant: Well I...

Audience Member: So is publishing is it your [Inaudible] with your research?

Dr. Nathaniel Bryant: That's a good question actually. What the hell am I doing with my life? Yeah, well, you know I'm 32 and have an albatross of student loans across my neck...
because I wrote about prison writing. One of the things that I would actually ultimately like to do is to start teaching in some capacity in prison. That's always been something I want to do. It's a problematic thing, right, and there's a lot of politics behind that people are commenting. I'd like to thin the walls of my own classroom a lot and sort of recognize that this is an institution that has expectations and puts people in relationship resources and things. And I'd like to thin the walls of that institution as well. I'm friends with people who run classes on college campuses that meet in prisons and kind of put your sort of population in relationship to prison populations in interesting ways that I think are productive for everybody. That requires a lot of work, that requires a lot of social tact that I don't have, it requires a lot of infrastructure too that I don't know how to manipulate or sort of maneuver just yet. But that is something that I would like to do if I had the resources and the time.

**Audience Member:** [Inaudible]

**Dr. Nathaniel Bryant:** Well I mean if you attended Michael's talk, the panel a couple weeks ago. I think you know what he said was important. I teach this material, I assign it, in some ways it's compulsory for my students to think about these things. But having conversations, sort of addressing misconceptions, thinking critically about how you consume a text like Orange is the New Black. I think all of these are equally valid, right. There is an ethos and an ethic involved in all of that. Collectively it's easier to get things done than it's to do it on your own. You know, sponsoring talks on campus, trying to understand what the local conditions are, and understanding if you can't find out what the local conditions are why is that the case, are important questions to ask. I always ask my students to think about why, why is this the case, if this seems wrong to you, you need to ask why and keep working on that, right. Eventually you're going to come up with an answer that may not be satisfactory but it's something you can work on. And I think making dense in these big global issues,
tying it to the local, considering the local effects of your decisions, the local power that you have individually and collectively is also useful. Because when we talk about prison we live in a golden goo-log, right. You can't break those walls down but what can you do locally I think is where to start actually.

Audience Member: [Inaudible], a lot of people here not just you know, I think they might be interested in this information I just found out recently. There is a community college called Feather River College which is an hour and a half drive away from here in Quincy. Where there's two really remarkable faculty that have started, associated an AA degree, a two year degree program that anybody can get via correspondence. And they're actually getting a ton of money through AB 109. And they're actually getting an, unbelievably, technological gadgets to people on the inside so they can read, so that they can actually view videos, all approved of course by the system. And [Inaudible] and sociology taught a course that you can actually enroll in the summer so there's also work possibility there.

And the other thing I want to mention, other resources a program called Inside Out. That's a national, now international program that has transferred to many, many states in California. One is a foot now actually. In California and what they do is they have classes where half the students are college students and the other half of students are people from the inside. And the class actually takes place inside the prison. The problem of course with that is that the university has to agree to fund that because you only get half the FD's, only half the students. I actually approached, I did the training and approached a dean of the past and got nowhere with that. It's an interesting possibility for those who are interested in teaching or taking the classes.

Dr. Nathaniel Bryant: I don't want to hold you against your will longer than I have. So thank you very much for attending, I really appreciate that.