On September 9, 2016, the 45th anniversary of the Attica prison uprising, prisoners from at least twenty-one states began striking against what they called “modern-day slavery.” The strike stands as one of the largest in U.S. history (figures are difficult to verify and the California prison hunger strike in 2013 involved at least 30,000 people) and several prisoners have lost their lives in this struggle. Prison strikers’ language is not hyperbolic. As Ava DuVernay’s new documentary on the 13th Amendment highlights, the very amendment that abolished slavery and guaranteed the legal emancipation of nearly four million enslaved people also carved out space for the continuation of slavery “as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted.”

In 2015, President Obama became the first sitting president to visit a U.S. prison. Since then, he banned the use of solitary confinement in federal juvenile prisons and the Bureau of Prisons recommended ending its contracts with private prisons. Obama has also commuted the sentences of hundreds of nonviolent drug offenders. Yet these changes only affect a small number of people housed in the federal prison system, which itself accounts for less than 10% of the total incarcerated population in the U.S. And while the war on drugs has ruined countless lives, most people in prison are not incarcerated for drug offenses. So Obama’s commutations do not address the main reasons people have been incarcerated; further, commutations shorten their sentence while leaving intact a host of restrictions—including disenfranchisement—faced by people with felony convictions. In a recent presidential election decided by fewer than one million votes, there were over six million voters disenfranchised for felony convictions.

Other aspects of the mass incarceration are not withering so much as transforming. Private prison corporations, which have been visible but small players in the system of mass incarceration, have already moved toward immigration detention, reentry, and electronic monitoring as new sources of carceral revenue. Within hours of the election of Donald Trump, stocks of Corrections Corporation of America (CCA) and the GEO Group skyrocketed, signaling another ratcheting up of private prisons and their relationship with the federal government. The excitement for bipartisan prison reform inside the beltway has dissipated amidst a modest reform agenda whose biggest focus has been on reducing government spending rather than ameliorating human suffering. These neoliberal cost-benefit analyses have placed more burdens on the backs of prisoners and their loved ones while leaving untouched the basic outlines of mass incarceration. The failures of contemporary prison reform serve as a reminder of the massive human and environmental costs of prisons.

The current prison strike’s struggle to achieve visibility (organizers have alleged a “mainstream-media blackout”) has been a central obstacle since the origins of prison organizing. In light of the dangerous implications of neoliberal prison reform and the marginalization of the current prison strike from the public political sphere, the Prison Abolition Syllabus (modeled after #FergusonSyllabus, #Charlestonsyllabus, #WelfareReformSyllabus and Trump Syllabus 2.0) seeks to contextualize and highlight prison organizing and prison abolitionist efforts from the 13th Amendment’s rearticulation of slavery to current resistance to mass incarceration, solitary confinement, and prison labor exploitation.
Week 1. Theories and Origins of Punishment


Week 2. Race, Sex, Labor, and Prisons in the Early Republic


Primary Sources and Multimedia


Week 3. Convict Leasing, the Chain Gang, and Contesting the Southern Prison Regime

• Talitha LeFlouria, “‘Under The Sting Of The Lash’: Gendered Violence, Terror, and Resistance in the South’s Convict Camps,” *The Journal of African American History* 100.3 (Summer 2015), 366–84.

**Primary Sources and Multimedia**

• Library of Congress, “*Convict Lease System.*”
• “Slavery by Another Name,” website.
• *Slavery by Another Name*, directed by Sam Pollard (PBS, 2012).
• *13th*, directed by Ava DuVernay (Kandoo Films, 2016).

**Week 4. Punishment in the New Metropolis**


**Week 5. Anti-Lynching and Prisoner Defense Campaigns**

- James W. Messerschmidt, “We Must Protect Our Southern Women: On Whiteness, Masculinities, and Lynching,” in *Race, Gender, and Punishment: From Colonialism to the War on Terror*, Mary Bosworth and Jeanne Flavin, eds. (Rutgers University Press, 2007), 77–94.

**Primary Sources and Multimedia**

Scottsboro Protest Exhibit, Modern American Poetry, University of Illinois.


Week 6. Liberal Punishment and Its Discontents

- Kathleen Cairns, Hard Time at Tehachapi: California’s First Women’s Prison (University of New Mexico Press, 2009).
- Mary Ellen Curtin, “‘Please Hear Our Cries’: The Hidden History of Black Prisoners in America,” in The Punitive Turn: New Approaches to Race and Incarceration, Deborah McDowell, Claudrena Harold, and Juan Battle, eds. (University of Virginia Press, 2013), 29–44.

Primary Sources and Multimedia


Week 7. The Civil Rights Movement, Prisoners, and Legal Reform


**Primary Sources and Multimedia**

- Arrest records of Rosa Parks, National Archives.
- “‘Jail, No Bail,’ A Strategy of Civil Disobedience.”

**Week 8. The Prison Rebellion Years**

- Jamie Bissonette, *When the Prisoners Ran Walpole: A True Story in the Movement for Prison Abolition* (South End Press, 2008)

**Primary Sources and Multimedia**

• *Frame-up! The Imprisonment of Martin Sostre*, directed by Joel Sucher, Steven Fischler, and Howard Blatt (Pacific Street Films, 1974).

**Week 9. Anticarceral Feminism**

• Christina Greene, “‘She Ain’t No Rosa Parks’: The Joan Little-Murder Case And Jim Crow Justice In The Post-Civil Rights South,” *The Journal of African American History* 100.3 (Summer 2015), 428–47.

**Primary Sources and Multimedia**

• *Histories of Sexuality and the Carceral State*, website.

**Week 10. Expanding the Prison Industrial Complex**

• Mary Pattillo, David Weiman, and Bruce Western, eds., *Imprisoning America: The Social Effects of Mass Incarceration* (Russell Sage Foundation, 2004).

**Primary Sources and Multimedia**

• *Broken on All Sides: Race, Mass Incarceration and New Visions for Criminal Justice in the U.S.*, directed by Matthew Pillischer (Matthew Pillischer, 2012).
• *Prison Policy Initiative*, website.
• *Knotted Line*, website

**Week 11. Health, Justice, and Resistance in the Neoliberal Order**


**Primary Sources and Multimedia**

• *Mothers of Bedford*, directed by Jenifer McShane (Women Make Movies, 2011).
• *The Last Graduation: The Rise and Fall of College Programs in Prison*, directed by Barbara Zahm (Deep Dish TV, 1997).
• *Tattooed Tears*, directed by Joan Churchill and Nicholas Broomfield (Gugo Film Production, 1978).

**Week 12. Carceral Intersections**

• Mary Beth Pfeiffer, *Crazy in America: The Hidden Tragedy of our Criminalized Mentally Ill* (Basic Books, 2007).

**Primary Sources and Multimedia**
• **Behind Bars**, directed by Louis Theroux (Kanopy Streaming, 2015).

**Week 13. Voices from Inside**

- Kevin Rashid Johnson, *Defying the Tomb: Selected Prison Writings and Art* (Kersplebedeb, 2010).
- James Yaki Sayles, *Meditations on Franz Fanon’s Wretched of the Earth: New Afrikan Revolutionary Writings* (Kersplebedeb, 2010).

**Primary Sources and Multimedia**

- Prisoners at Sing Sing Prison, *excerpt from “Let Justice Roll Down Like Waters.”*

**Week 14. The Future of Prison Activism**


Keramet Reiter, “The Pelican Bay Hunger Strike: Resistance within the Structural Constraints of a US Supermax Prison,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 113.3 (Summer 2014), 579–611.


**Primary Sources and Multimedia**

- [A Vision for Black Lives](#), website.
- Mariame Kaba, [Prison Culture Blog](#), website.
- [Sentencing Project](#), website.
- [Concrete, Steel and Paint](#), directed by Cindy Burstein (New Day Films, 2009).