This seminar addresses concepts of criminality, justice, and punishment in Western humanist traditions. We will trace conversations about jurisprudence in literature, philosophy, political theory, and legal studies; our topics will include democracy and the origins of justice, narrating criminality, and the aesthetic force mobilized by criminal trials. We will also observe local courtroom proceedings and do research in historical archives about significant criminal prosecutions. Throughout this reading and research, our central questions will be ambitious: what political and moral terms have been significant for constructing notions of criminality? What are the origins of the trial, how have trials been used as an aesthetic resource in imaginative writing, and how do aesthetic concerns inform trial proceedings? How do modern regimes of punishment relate to humanistic traditions and goals? How do the ways that crime and punishment have been imagined have at stake fundamental concepts of the human?

This course fulfills the University Writing Seminar requirement. This is a four-credit course. We expect students to spend at least nine hours a week preparing for class sessions and completing assignments.

Learning Objectives:
- to develop close reading skills and the ability to make compelling interpretive claims, in writing and speaking, on the basis of close reading
- to develop archival research skills by using local archival material relating to a major historical trial
- to critically examine significant aspects of the history of the trial as a social and political practice in democracies
- to learn significant aspects of how trials work in contemporary U. S. courtrooms
- to be able to trace conversations among many genres of writing about complex questions involving justice, criminality, and punishment
- to be able to analyze the aesthetic and narrative dimensions of legal procedures and practices

Required Books:
Course Reader [CR; available from instructors]
Richard Wright, *Native Son* (HarperPerennial)
Derf Blackderf, *My Friend Dahmer* (Abrams ComicArts)
Michael M. Topp, ed., *The Sacco and Vanzetti Case: A Brief History with Documents* (Bedford/St. Martin’s)
Jessica Blank and Erik Jensen, *The Exonerated* (Faber and Faber)

**Course Requirements and Assignments:**

**Dramatic / Creative Class Presentation on Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment***: 5-10 minute class presentation or dramatic reading involving *Crime and Punishment*. In your presentation, read a story about or stage a conversation between Raskolnikov and some other character or author from our reading (e.g., Socrates, King, Kohlhaas, Koenig, or Thomas). What would they debate? What could they learn from one another? What would each character want the other to better understand? If you write a dramatic dialogue, others can help you perform it in class. Credit / No Credit. 10%

**Sacco and Vanzetti Essay**: 5 pages. An analysis based on primary documents from the Sacco and Vanzetti case, available at Goldfarb and in Topp’s casebook, of the role that a particular social actor or agent played in this public event which encompassed a criminal investigation, prosecution, as well as its aftermath. Your analysis might interpret the position, influence or effect of a political organization, newspaper, government official or agency, literary figure, legal defense fund, or similar participant. 25%

**Final Essay**: Over the entire semester, you will develop a final essay about the ways in which our texts represent the political dimensions of criminal justice. Your essay will investigate tensions between ideals of justice and state coercion, between victim suffering and the political uses of criminal prosecution, and between justice as a moral concern and jurisprudence as a bureaucratic process. In this essay, you will formulate your question and develop your ideas in several ways: by interpreting literary texts, analyzing theoretical concepts, researching historical events, analyzing a courtroom, and engaging other texts or practices that help you consider how claims of justice are inevitably involved in social power.

This final essay can draw on your work in previous class writing, including your class presentation and the Sacco and Vanzetti assignment. The final essay will unfold in several steps, short ungraded exercises that you will complete throughout the semester:

1) **Moment of Textual Fascination**: 1-2 pages. A commentary on a passage, from our reading, that you find powerful or strange. How does this passage compel your attention? What way of thinking or feeling does it make available? Credit / No Credit. 5%

2) **Close Reading**: 2 pages. A searching analysis of a passage, in our reading, that bears complex meanings or articulates unusual ideas in its form, technique, or style. In this assignment, read slowly to reveal this writing’s complexity (its tensions, ambiguities, submerged associations, interesting or surprising pleasures).
Because this kind of careful reading can reveal implicit patterns in a text, feel free to move in your discussion from your starting point to other passages or textual elements that you’ve discovered are also imaginistically, thematically, structurally, or in some other surprising way involved in this passage. (Making this kind of connection, or tracing such a pattern, will help you fill up the expected two pages.) Credit / No Credit. 5%

3) Intertextual Conversation: 2-3 pages. Bring two of our texts into conversation about a complex, challenging question. How does each writer approach this problem, make it urgent and vivid? What can we better understand about one text by considering it in light of the other? What complex question, with which moving parts, do these writers help you formulate? In this assignment, you should begin to develop a theoretical term or concept that will continue to interest you in later assignments. Credit / No Credit. 5%

4) Courtroom Analysis: 3 pages. An analysis of the courtroom practices we observe in subtle detail, a few interrelated structural or formal elements of these courtroom proceedings, some of the organizational principles or techniques that made them possible. You might consider such questions as: how are participant identities or roles marked? How are bodies represented, exposed, and organized in space? What kinds of speech acts occur, and how are these speech acts given their impact? What else do you notice about the way this space works and what is made to happen there? In your description and analysis, you should de-normalize or de-normalize what you’ve observed, that is, reveal the care with which these proceedings are constructed. Credit / No Credit. 5%

5) Letter to a Friend: a 2 page letter to a friend, in an exploratory voice, in which you explain a question or problem about justice and power, and how you are beginning to understand it. Credit / No Credit. 5%

6) Rough Draft: at least 5 pages of notes and initial writing, for class workshop. Not for credit.

7) Final Essay: 7-10 pages. 40%

**Unit One: Democracy and Socratic Problems of Justice**
Plato, *Euthyphro*, *Apology*, *Apology*, *Crito*, *Phaedo*  
Martin Luther King, Jr, “Letter from Birmingham Jail” [CR]

**Unit Two: Narrating Criminality**
Heinrich von Kleist, *Michael Kohlhaas*  
Sarah Koenig, *Serial*, season 1, episodes 1-6  
Richard Wright, *Native Son*  
Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment*  
Derf Blackderf, *My Friend Dahmer*

**Unit Three: Trials in Boston: Sacco and Vanzetti and Today**
Trip to Boston Municipal Court of Judge Paul McManus  
Meeting in Goldfarb Library, Special Collections for work with Sacco and Vanzetti Collections
Michael M. Topp (Ed.), *The Sacco and Vanzetti Case: A Brief History with Documents*, Part One, Appendix: A Chronology of Events Related to the Sacco and Vanzetti Case, and student choice of other documents (skip and browse)

**Unit Four: Rendering Verdicts**
Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*
Optional: Margarethe von Trotta, dir., *Hannah Arendt* (film)
Sarah Koenig, *Serial*, season 1, episodes 5-12
Jessica Blank and Erik Jensen, *The Exonerated*

**Unit Five: Imagining Punishment**
Special Lecture: Benjamin Selman, Staff Attorney, Massachusetts Committee for Public Counsel Services, Public Defender Division, Somerville Superior Court Trial Unit
*Wall Tappings: An International Anthology of Women’s Prison Writings 200 to the Present*, selections by Mila D. Aguilar, Chilean Political Prisoner collective, Carolyn Baxter, Diane Hamill Metzger, and Patricia McConnel [CR]
Carolyn Baxter, from *Prison Solitary and Other Free Government Services*
Patricia McConnel, from *Sing Soft, Sing Loud*
Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, chs. 2 and 3 [CR]
Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Franz Kafka, “In the Penal Colony” [CR]