

Immigration and Incarceration

Harvard College Writing Program

Spring 2022

Instructor: Erin Routon

Time: Section 236 M/W 12-1:15pm; Section 237 M/W 1:30-2:45pm

Place: Sever Hall 201

Office hours: By appointment (in-person or via Zoom)

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"We saw all these people behind the fence, looking out, hanging onto the wire, and looking out because they were anxious to know who was coming in. But I will never forget the shocking feeling that human beings were behind this fence like animals. And we were going to also lose our freedom and walk inside of that gate and find ourselves...cooped up there...when the gates were shut, we knew that we had lost something that was very precious. That we were no longer free."

-Mary Tsukamoto, formerly incarcerated Japanese American

*"Running towards where, where,
Write down the blood and tears of history,
A migrating person carries full dreams."*

-'Golden Venture'
refugee-detainee, from *Fly to Freedom*

"Through the port-hole I could see the great city receding into the distance, its sky-line of buildings traceable by their rearing heads. It was my beloved city, the metropolis of the New World. It was America, indeed, America repeating the terrible scenes of tsarist Russia! I glanced up—the Statue of Liberty!"

-Emma Goldman



Photo: Dorothea Lange

Description

The course aims to answer a series of questions fundamental to an understanding of the nation: What role have the fences and bars of carceral facilities—including jails, prisons, detention centers, and concentration camps—played in American immigration? Furthermore, what role do such places play in the stories Americans tell themselves about immigration? This course examines both the historical and contemporary significance of migrant incarceration, broadly construed, in the U.S.: from the 'processing' and interrogation of new migrants at Ellis Island and Angel Island to forced encampment of primarily Japanese Americans during World War 2 to the present-day detention of undocumented migrants and asylum-seekers. Throughout the course, students will consider larger

questions about American immigration and traditions of incarceration: In speaking about these subjects, how, and why, do words matter? How does one shed light on experiences and spaces that are intentionally obscured? And finally, is the incarceration of migrants in America an exceptional practice, or is it the norm? In responding to these questions, we will look at a variety of representations, from poetry to the graphic memoirs of Miné Okubo and George Takei to the federally-impounded photography of Dorothea Lange and ethnographic observations of contemporary detention.

Rationale

In this course, students will learn about immigrant incarceration and their relation to this topic through focused engagement within written exercises. Immigration is a topic that continues to dominate contemporary political conversation and has indeed always played a significant role in the narratives which define and delimit American identity. Recent government administrative events and policy changes, however, have brought the topic of incarceration or forced separation of migrants to the fore in public discussions. Students in this course will bring different levels of awareness of and/or engagement with these historical, transnational phenomena to in-class discussions, writing exercises, and exploratory essay assignments. Writing is an important mechanism for not only communicating ideas in an informative or persuasive way but also for making sense of our own perceptions of phenomena and the recognized and unrecognized arguments which inform those positions. Throughout the course, students will develop stronger critical reading and writing skills through these practices while also coming to appreciate the unique value of social scientific approaches to knowledge production.

Learning Objectives

The course supports students in developing skills and competency in the following areas:

- 1) reading critically, identifying main arguments and locating supporting evidence in texts/articles
- 2) understanding the basic elements of expository writing and argumentation
- 3) producing one's own arguments and communicating them in a clear, coherent, and well-supported manner
- 4) drafting and revising one's own written work
- 5) editing others' work in a constructive and supportive way

Readings

Readings and other instructive materials will range in both discipline and form, from ethnographic texts to memoirs, photography, and historical texts, among others. The course begins with Unit 1 in two places at once—Ellis Island and Angel Island—and closely examines the striking poetry associated with them, some of which has come to define our perceptions of immigration in America. In Unit 2, we will look at the historical, autobiographical sequential art text *Citizen 13660*, by Miné



Okubo, which movingly illustrates Japanese American incarceration during the second World War, from its beginnings to its endings. In comparison with Okubo's memoir, we will also read George Takei's graphic memoir—*They Called Us Enemy*—composed under very different circumstances and taking a distinct visual and authorial tone. Alongside these readings, we will examine the photographic work of Dorothea Lange, which also depicted this period. In the final unit, we'll look at a variety of readings and artistic representations of contemporary migrant, and increasingly refugee, incarceration, including selections from Giorgio Agamben, Mark Dow's *American Gulag* and Loyd and Mountz's *Boats, Borders, and Bases: Race, The Cold War, and The Rise of Migration Detention in the U.S*. The course will also frequently engage with podcasts, films, and news analysis. **Required texts for the course are *Citizen 13660* by Miné Okubo and *They Called Us Enemy* by George Takei.**

Photo: Historic Fort Ontario



Photo: NYTimes

Essays

Essays will actively engage with distinct written forms and will explore the significance of relevant themes—such as exclusion, identity, and belonging. The course will be divided into the following three units: 1) Arrival, 2) Threat, and 3) Liminality. In the assignment for Unit 1, students will be asked to reflect on a few, brief pieces of writing—articles and a poem—while considering recent debates surrounding the changes to U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) organization's mission statement. The piece will ultimately take the form of an opinion-editorial essay. The writing assignment for Unit 2 will take shape as a comparison of texts. This assignment will ask students

to compare Okubo and Takei's graphic memoirs, thinking on the distinct ways in which that which is intentionally 'unseen' is made visible. The final, Unit 3 assignment will ask students to reflect upon larger questions, uniting the varied history of this nation's relationship with migrant incarceration.

Assignments and Guidelines

Students will produce a combination of informal reading comments—hereafter referred to as reading journals—response papers, and formal essays. The writing assignments will serve as responses to the readings, primarily, but they can also respond to contemporary issues students find relevant to bring into the course discussion or reflect on in their essays. For each class, **students will be expected to submit a brief, informal journal response to that day's reading/s, which you will upload to Canvas at least 24 hours before our class meeting time.** You can approach these two ways: one, you can either write an independent response to the reading/s, reflecting on whatever aspect you'd like. You can pose questions, offer critique, reflect on your favorite or least favorite aspect of the reading/s, compare it to things going on in the world, etc. OR two, you can make your journal a response to another student's journal post (as long as you're not just reiterating what they're saying, obviously). Just to clarify, these are very informal. Do not stress about your writing in these journals. **The only structural parameter for this journal activity is that it is at least a**

paragraph (3-5 sentences min.) in length. You are certainly allowed to write more than that, if you desire. These are going to be used, in some aspect, in our in-class discussions, so make sure they are uploaded on Canvas at least a full day before we meet.

Students will write one “response paper”—which will also be brief, though longer than the reading comments—per unit. These papers are more like writing exercises, and they will respond to the reading while focusing on prepping you for your essay. More details on these will be provided closer to their deadlines.

The length expectations for the three formal essays are as follows:

Essay 1: 700-900 words

Essay 2: 6-8 pages

Essay 3: 8-10 pages

More specific details (including prompts and expectations) for essays will be shared periodically throughout the semester. All formal written assignments must be submitted on the date as designated in the calendar. If there are any issues with submitting by the due date, students must speak with me about those issues prior to the due date.

Class Structure

We will meet twice a week, Monday and Wednesday, for 75 minutes. Each week, on a single class day, **students will voluntarily group into 3 persons and lead that day’s discussion of the readings**. Students will sign up for **2 class meetings** each to lead the reading discussion (with their partners). For this, you will be expected to **briefly summarize the reading for the class and come prepared with some discussion questions or ideas**, which you may pull from the reading journals (on Canvas) for that day. Because this is meant to be a collaborative classroom, the student leaders will be fully in charge of the discussion (not the instructor), so leaders should feel free to approach this discussion how they want. On the other class day of the week, we’ll focus less on the reading and more on improving our writing and preparing for essays. Throughout the semester, as you’ll see on the calendar, we’ll have some days which are irregular, meaning we won’t be meeting in class. We will have some ‘field trips’ and on conference weeks, those 1:1 meetings will take the place of our normal class meetings. These special days will be outlined on the calendar (which will be shared/updated throughout the semester).