

Immigration and Incarceration

Fall 2021



*“I am not bitter. I hope that things can be learned from this tragic episode, for I believe it could happen again.” –
Miné Okubo, *Citizen 13660**

What is the United States’ relationship with immigrants, rather how do we think about and talk about immigrants? What are the stories of immigration that define those narratives and ideas? And how does incarceration fit into those? These questions are what this course aims to answer. This course examines both the historical and contemporary significance of migrant incarceration, broadly construed, in this nation: 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, to name a few examples. We’ll also examine the detentions of [Jewish](#) and [Haitian refugees](#), the lengthy, extrajudicial imprisonments in Guantánamo Bay, and current practices of “[family detention](#)”. We’ll consider questions of identity and nationality, profits and private interests, and the subject of [mass incarceration](#). We’ll see abandoned [spaces repurposed](#) for eerily familiar causes and challenges to loyalty, belonging, and rights reappear time and again. Ultimately, our readings, writings, and discussions will question the meaning of America’s carceral traditions and challenge its (still ongoing) justifications.



Units

The course is divided into three thematized units. The first unit, “Arrival”, focuses on specific carceral spaces—in particular, Ellis Island and Angel Island—that play important figurative roles in American narratives of the arrival of new migrants. The second unit, “Threat”, examines war-time incarceration and exclusion of so-deemed ‘threatening’ migrant communities and individuals. The third and final unit, “Liminality”, explores the rise of what we now consider ‘immigrant detention’, including the normalization of practices of refugee incarceration, involvement of [profit-making entities](#), and ongoing states of imprisonment. In this final unit, we’ll approach the anthropological idea of the liminal, considering how immigrant status leaves many imprisoned in more figurative ways, or ways beyond the physical boundary of the detention walls. Across the three units, students will be asked to 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

Immigration is a topic which continues to dominate contemporary political conversation and has indeed always played a significant role in the narratives which define and delimit American identity. Recent federal administrative events, 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, creative writing exercises, and exploratory essay assignments. Writing is an important mechanism for not only communicating ideas or stories 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. In this course, students will learn about migrant incarceration and their relation to this topic through focused engagement within written exercises. 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



Why this course?

Migrant incarceration—or immigrant detention—is a subject that, despite its prevalence in popular media, political debate, and public discussion, tends to stay fixed in the present or relatively recent past. I enjoy teaching this course not only because this is my area of research expertise, but also because this country has a long tradition of incarcerating im/migrants that often gets forgotten or lost in both contemporary discussions of immigrant detention and America’s identification as a “nation of immigrants”. I enjoy constantly learning about the intersections between these two subjects as I teach this course, and I enjoy sharing this history with students who may or may not be aware of these spaces and practices. As we learn together about the subject, I appreciate the opportunity to help my students step into the next phase of their experience as academic writers, using those skills within and beyond our time together.