

Immigration and Incarceration

Harvard College Writing Program

Fall 2021

Instructor: Erin Routon

Time: M/W 3:00-4:15pm; M/W 4:30-5:45pm

Place: Lamont Library 240 (FAS)

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



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



Photo: Historic Fort Ontario

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: NYTimes

Assignments

Written assignments 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 a larger question, uniting the varied history of this nation's relationship with migrant incarceration: what about im/migrant incarceration in the U.S. is, or is not, exceptional?

The length expectations for these essays are as follows:

Essay 1: 900-1000 words

Essay 2: 6-8 pages

Essay 3: 10-12 pages

Assignments and Guidelines

Students will produce a combination of in-class writing, response paper exercises, and formal essays. The writing assignments will serve as responses to the readings, primarily, but will also respond to contemporary issues students find relevant to bring into the course discussion. Specific details for individual essays will be shared periodically throughout the semester. All formal written assignments must be submitted on the date as designated in the calendar shared at the beginning of the course. If there are any issues with submitting by the due date, students must speak with me about those issues prior to the due date. All formal assignments must have the following:

- 1) 12-point, standard font
- 2) Double-spaced, with 1-inch margins
- 3) Numbered pages

4) Name, date, and essay title on the first page (no additional information about the course, etc.)

Resources

While we will discuss ways to improve your writing throughout the entire course, there are also many online resources to help beyond the class. Here are just a few:

[Harvard Writing Center: tutors](#) and [online resources](#) available

[Purdue Online Writing Lab \(OWL\)](#)

[Chicago Manual of Style Online](#)

[APA Style Guide/Tips](#)

[MLA Style Guide/Tips](#)

[Grammar Girl](#)

[Guide to Grammar and Writing](#)

Guidelines for Attendance and Participation

Students will be required to attend and participate in all classes. For students' participation, they will be expected to actively participate in classroom discussions and activities, offer peer feedback to one another in relation to in-class assignments and workshops, and attend conferences with me.

Conferences

Students will be required to meet with me at least three times throughout the semester, once during each unit. These conferences are important opportunities to discuss/workshop writing assignments, exchange feedback, and check in with one another about any other issues or concerns.

Absences and Lateness

Attendance on-time to all classes is important and will be a part of your participation grade. I will be taking attendance at the beginning of each class, so if you intend to arrive late for a class for whatever reason, you will need to let me know (via email) ahead of class time. Excused absences will require a conversation with me and potentially evidence of the reason for missing class.