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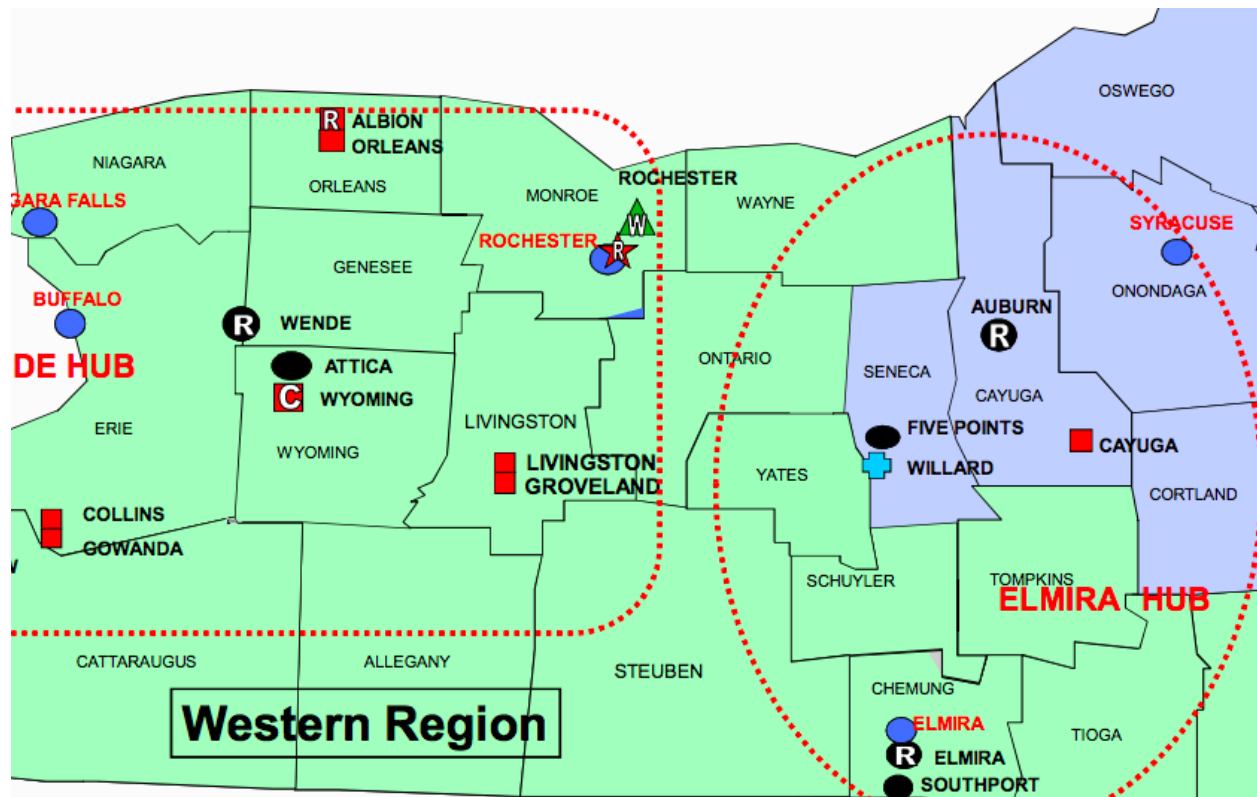
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CULTURAL POLITICS OF PRISON TOWNS

Course Description

Rochester sits in one of the world's most explicitly carceral landscapes, with more than a dozen state prisons within a 90 min drive. This co-taught course is an ethnography lab. It launches the second year of a collaborative ethnographic research project designed to examine how the presence of prisons in towns around Rochester reflects and shapes the political, economic, and cultural lives of those who live in the region. Students will be introduced to methods and practices of ethnography and conduct firsthand research on the cultural politics of our region's prison towns. Through assigned reading, students will learn about the history, sociology, and cultural logics of Rochester and the wider region, and of mass incarceration. What does the presence of a prison do and mean for a person living near one? In what ways do our local communities depend on prisons for their economic survival? How does prison intersect with other area industries? How does the presence of prisons shape locals' notions of justice and citizenship, of how the world is and how the world must be? How do these nearby but largely invisible institutions shape the ways that we live in Rochester?

Recommended prior courses: Introduction to Cultural Anthropology or Incarceration Nation



On teaching and learning during the Covid era: A philosophical preamble

As formal practices staged in a semi-public sphere, classroom communities tend to be somewhat attenuated affairs. We perform our required roles; much remains out of view. People struggle; people hurt. Sometimes others know what's up; mostly we don't. Covid affords us the opportunity of an ethical reset one notch in the direction of mutual care. Even if you are lucky, and you remain healthy, and your loved ones remain healthy, we understand that you all are dealing with an impossible situation. As instructors who are also parents, we too are dealing with an impossible situation. Inevitably, at times things will not always go as we hope. It is an article of faith in this space that everyone is doing the very best that they can under the circumstances. If you have special needs that we may be in a position to meet; please ask us—you will find us to be accommodating. If you have special needs that we can't possibly meet but you want us to know about them; please tell us—you will find us to be compassionate. If your preference is to tell us nothing, and to keep this relationship professionally distanced—you will find us to be respectful. Come what may, *we know that you are doing the very best that you can under the circumstances.*

On class structure

Trying to teach in person with limited space and far-flung students during a pandemic makes zero sense to us, either pedagogically or in terms of public health. Needless to say, however, zoom is no panacea. We figure that 90 minutes on zoom is probably already past the point of diminishing returns, but our plan will be to zoom as a group for that long, and then to do other things. Depending on the week, "other things" could include meeting in smaller groups, and/or or meeting one-on-one and/or directing you to other materials (reading, podcasts, etc). Should it be feasible, we would both love to meet you individually, and in working groups, in person, provided that we can do so at a distance outdoors.

Course Requirements and Grades

Assignments and Class participation (1/3 of final grade)

We will expect to see you in class with your camera on, should your location and access to technology make it feasible. Should you be unable to make it to class, we expect you to engage substantively via the Blackboard discussion board: a) read the summary of class that students will provide each session, and b) contribute substantive responses based on your own reading of assigned materials and engagement with classmates' posts. Each class we will designate two students to serve as scribe. These minutes will be posted in the previous week's discussion board thread. If you cannot attend class, be sure to review (and feel encouraged to comment on) these minutes.

Weekly Research and Writing Assignments (1/3 of final grade)

We cannot do in-person fieldwork this semester. We explain below what we are intending instead. However, you will still have weekly writing assignments, which you need to turn in by the time you go to sleep Tuesday night. More about these below as well.

Final Research Project (1/3 of final grade)

Each student will present preliminary findings in class and produce a final research project in the form of a scholarly paper, a multi-media presentation, a digital archive, website, podcast, or some other form to be determined. (More information to be provided soon enough.)

Course themes and research groups

In past years, we've structured our research groups around particular towns—to date we've now had teams in Albion, Auburn, Attica, Batavia, Mt. Morris, Alden, Elmira, and Rochester. With Covid making this impossible, this semester we've decided to try something different. Rather than focusing on individual towns, our research groups will be focusing on four themes. By the middle of October, we will divide the class into research groups, to focus on the following four themes:

“The flight map” Picture the map in the back of an airline magazine, which shows all the places the airline services: a map with hubs, nodes, places serviced by partners, etc. We love looking at those maps. Maybe you do too. Picture a map of New York state with NYDOCCS prisons as hubs. Think about the various populations that move through these spaces: incarcerated people, correctional officers, civilian staff, contractors and vendors, visitors, volunteers. Let’s get as much data as we can for some of the prisons in our region that tell us who is coming and going, what are they doing when they’re at the prison, and where they are coming from and returning to. Let’s produce these maps, and potentially find other ways to represent this data and its significance.

Covid Prisons and jails have been acute Covid hotspots. There is reason therefore to see prison towns as sites of contagion and transmission. How is Covid effecting those who are incarcerated and their families? How are people who are going in and out of the prison thinking about Covid? How, if at all, is Covid factoring on how townspeople are talking about the prisons in their midst? What policies, whether pertaining to prison administration, public health, state support, or otherwise, is Covid pushing into the public discourse? How are people organizing in response to Covid?

Politics Over the course of this semester we will almost certainly witness either a presidential election or a profound constitutional crisis. Elections will also take place at the state and county levels. But by “politics” we are not interested solely in electoral politics. State-level anticarceral campaigns for reforms to parole, bail, solitary confinement, and other prison-related issues continue to hum along, and with the killing of George Floyd, communities are engaged like never before. How are political contestations over prisons and policing playing out in prison towns, and in our region more broadly where prisons are such a prominent feature?

Religion As we will explore, modern incarceration in general and mass incarceration in particular have certain religious dimensions. What does local religion look like in an American prison town in the era of mass incarceration? How are churches and congregations connected to prisons and to the people that are incarcerated there? Materially and symbolically, how might religious ideas and practices be buttressing the existing carceral order? How might religious individuals and groups be pushing back *against* the ruling carceral order?

Weekly writing assignments

Your weekly writing assignment is due on the blackboard discussion board by the time you go to sleep Tuesday night. For the first six weeks of the course, your assignment is to respond to the assigned text. Our intention here is to think practically and methodologically in preparation for research. In each response then, you should look to harvest 1-3 of each the following:

- *Analytic(s)* Identify a critical category that appears in the week’s assignment. Articulate what the category is, what it means, how it may be of use for thinking about some aspect of local life in relation to some aspect of the prison industrial complex
- *Method(s)* How might you go about trying to *apply* this analytic in practice, methodologically. Where might you look? Whom might you try to talk you? What sorts of questions might you ask? How might you do this virtually, and how would you do this in person, in an alternative landscape?

As a general ballpark, your writing assignment should be roughly 250 words. You are very much encouraged to read your classmates writing assignments, and you are invited to respond to them. (This sort of engagement seems especially desirable in the event that you are unable to zoom with us live.) Each instructor will make a point of replying to a three posts each week prior to class. We will come to class ready to discuss your posts, and you should too.

After week six, your assignments are research assignments. We will discuss these more in the weeks ahead.

Required Books

The only required book for this course is Brett Story, *Prison Land: Mapping Carceral Power Across Neoliberal America* (2019), available for purchase at Barnes and Noble on campus and is available as an ebook through the library. Other required and recommended course texts will be made available on Blackboard.

Further notes:

- All assignments and activities associated with this course must be performed in accordance with University of Rochester's code of **Academic Honesty**. Ask us if you have questions or concerns. <http://www.rochester.edu/college/honesty>
- The University of Rochester respects and welcomes students of all backgrounds and abilities. In the event you encounter any barrier(s) to full participation in this course due to the impact of disability, please contact the **Office of Disability Resources**. The access coordinators in the Office of Disability Resources can meet with you to discuss the barriers you are experiencing and explain the eligibility process for establishing academic accommodations. You can reach the Office of Disability Resources at: disability@rochester.edu; (585) 276-5075; Taylor Hall. Please also feel free to come talk to us at any point in the semester if you have concerns about accessibility of the materials or assignments.
- **Undocumented/DACA Student support contacts:**
<http://rochester.edu/college/ccas/undergraduate/daca/index.html>
- **University of Rochester CARE network** <https://www.rochester.edu/care/>
- This course follows the College credit hour policy for four-credit courses. This course meets once weekly for three academic hours per week. The course also includes independent out-of-class assignments for one academic hour per week including ethnographic observation, films, supplementary reading, and attending lectures.

Statement of Caregiving Responsibilities: Please remain mindful that staff and faculty at the University of Rochester are facing considerable challenges with caregiving responsibilities arising from the Covid-19 pandemic. For example, all public K-12 schools in Monroe county will be relying on remote instruction, and few safe alternatives for backup childcare are readily available. We both have elementary children and partners with full-time jobs. At the same time, we acknowledge that students, too, may be subject to a host of pressures and difficulties that will make learning this semester especially difficult. In the interest of encouraging universal flexibility and dispensation, we have made the following adjustments to our usual course policies: more flexible attendance policies, possibilities for asynchronous engagement, more structured group projects.

Course Schedule

- 8/26 Introduction
- 9/2 Brett Story, (dir.), *The Prison in 12 Landscapes* (2016)
- 9/9 Brett Story, *Prison Land: Mapping Carceral Power across Neoliberal America* (Minnesota, 2019)
Especially Introduction, Chpt 3 (Rural Extractions), Chpt 4 (The Prison In-Between)
- 9/16 Flight map
Megan Comfort, "'On-Line' at San Quentin," from *Doing Time Together: Love and Family in the Shadow of the Prison*, 21-64
Thompson, Heather Ann. Rethinking Working-Class Struggle through the Lens of the Carceral State: Toward a Labor History of Inmates and Guards," *Labor*: 8:3 (2011), 15-45

Doughty and Dubler, "Prison Towns and Prison Culture in the United States." Proposal to the National Science Foundation (August, 2020)

- 9/23 Covid
[Ruth Wilson Gilmore on Covid-19, Decarceration, and Abolition](#)
[Covid-19's Impact on People in Prison](#)
[A State-by-State Look at Coronavirus in Prisons](#)
[These towns love their federal prison. But Covid-19 is straining the relationship](#)
[Coronavirus Exposes Precarity of Prison Towns](#)
[California severely short on firefighting crews after COVID-19 lockdown at prison camps](#)
[The Recession Is About to Slam Cities. Not Just the Blue-State Ones.](#)
- 9/30 Politics
John Eason, "It's like the city, only quieter: Making the Rural Ghetto" in *Big House on the Prairie*, 40-64
Andrea Morrell, "Policing the Carceral State: Prisons and Panic in an Upstate New York Prison Town"
Alex Blanchette and Marcel LaFlamme, "An Anthropological Almanac of Rural Americas"
[What Black Lives Matter Has Revealed About Small-Town America](#)
[A Green New Deal for Decarceration](#)
- 10/7 Religion
Jennifer Graber, "The Furnace at Auburn, 1816-1827," from *The Furnace of Affliction*, 73-101, 197-201*
Joshua Dubler and Vincent Lloyd, "The Political Theology of Mass Incarceration," from *Break Every Yoke*, 65-104
- 10/14 Research assignment 1: Public information assignment
Readings TBD
"Doing Fieldwork in a Pandemic"
- 10/21 Research assignment 2: Document assignment
Readings TBD
- 10/28 Research assignment 3: Virtual event participation-observation assignment
Readings: Emerson, *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes* excerpts
- 11/4 Research assignment 4: Interview
Readings : Weiss, *Learning from Strangers*, Chpt 3-4, Preparing for Interviewing and Interviewing
- 11/11 Research assignment 5: Social Drama Assignment
Readings TBD
- 11/18 Research assignment 6: Researcher's choice
Readings TBD
- 11/25 Group meetings [no formal class] Make up assignment (if necessary)
- 12/2 Final project workshop [groups 1&2 presenting]
- 12/9 Final project workshop [groups 3&4 presenting]

NOTE: Syllabus assignments are subject to amendment, particularly in response to emergent events. Please pay attention to notifications in class and to announcements on Blackboard.

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