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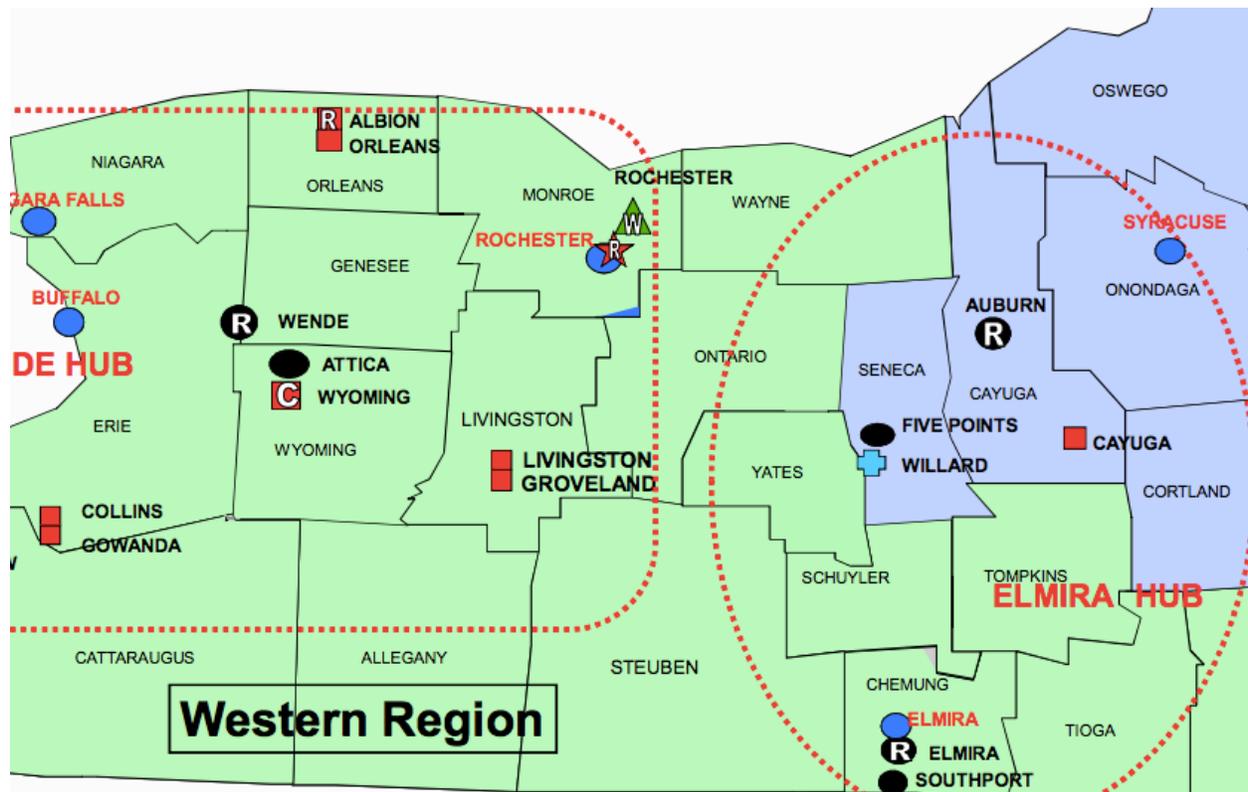
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## CULTURAL POLITICS OF PRISON TOWNS

### 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. Now funded with a grant from the National Science Foundation, this fall's course launches the fourth 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



## Course Requirements and Grades

### Attendance and Class Participation (1/3 of final grade)

We expect to see you in class each week. You are entitled to one unexcused absence per semester, without explanation or apology. Any more than that, however, and we should be in touch. Please come to class prepared to discuss the assigned material, ready to share out about your research, with questions for us and the class.

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

You will have weekly writing assignments that, in the beginning of the semester engage with classroom readings, and for the remainder of the semester, will be rooted in specific research tasks. You will find more information on the weekly assignments below.

### 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 forthcoming.) This semester we are aiming for a collective exhibit of our shared projects on campus in the winter.

### Notes on Fieldwork Research Visits

- Each student will conduct 8 research visits. Ideally these should be in person, safely following university and state Covid guidelines. However, if need be, virtual “visits” may suffice.
- You must turn in fieldnotes for each visit. This is a collaborative research project and your notes are an essential contribution to the overall project.
- All students must complete CITI certification to be eligible to conduct research.
- Share the Information Sheet, provided on course website, with people in fieldsites.
- Fieldwork visits will be reimbursed as follows:
  - Transportation: Zipcar, rental, or mileage for your own vehicle (2021 mileage rate) of 56 cents per mile (so document your odometer before and after, or show route and mileage on a google map printout).
  - Food: We will reimburse \$10 per student per field visit for food/drink (not alcohol) *in the research sites*. Indicate full names of who was at the meal.
  - Other research ideas that may need reimbursement? Ask us in person or by email for approval.
- Submitting expenses:
  - Provide ORIGINAL receipts within 2 weeks of research visit
  - Include names of all people in vehicle or at a meal
  - For the person being reimbursed, include a) full name (not nickname), b) student ID and c) CMC box number, d) clear description of the expense (date, purpose, etc).
  - Each week after class receipts will be submitted to Donna Mero (Lattimore 440).
  - For expenses under \$75 you will be given a signed form to take to the Bursar’s office.
  - For expenses *over* \$75 you will sign a form and return it to Donna Mero. It will be processed through HRMS (online) and a check will be mailed to you. To check your address in HRMS:
    - Log into HRMS <https://www.rochester.edu/people>
    - Enter your credentials (nearly always NETID)
    - Go to Main Menu—Self Service—Personal Information, Personal Details
    - Addresses is one of the tabs on the left. Verify or update your mailing address.
  - If you do not have an account in HRMS talk to us or Donna.

### Notes on Website and Confidentiality

- The work we do in this course takes place in the classroom, in the field, and in our shared webspace accessible at <https://f21.prisonstowns.digitalscholar.rochester.edu/>
- This is where you will turn in your fieldnotes and other data you gather (photos, audio files, archival documents, etc), add tags/code to your fieldnotes, be able to access past students' materials, and give and receive comments on the work. We will provide more information.
- This website is shared only among members of the class and requires password access. All material accessed and uploaded to this site should be considered confidential to this research project, and neither access nor materials should be shared outside our classroom, particularly in ways that identify individuals. This material is governed by the human subjects ethics of confidentiality and privacy at the heart of this research. That is: treat these fieldnotes and written work with the respect you want others to bring to your work.

### Course themes and research groups

This is the fourth time we've taught this class. From the project's inception we have divided students into research groups. The first two years, those groups were place specific, and we fielded groups based in Albion, Alden, Attica, Auburn, Batavia, Elmira, Mt. Morris, and Rochester. In year three, as a Covid-era adaptation, we switched to research groups unified by theme. Our themes were Covid, "Flight map" (i.e. the movement of bodies in and out of prisons), Politics, and Religion. The adaptation worked, and so this year we are once again going to group researchers by theme. This year's themes are Criminalization, Decarceration, Land, and Love. By the end of September each of you will have selected to join one of those groups. In the process of your weekly research visits, you will soon want to zero in on a specific location to geographically ground your selected theme. Themes will be unspooled at length in the second and third weeks of class, but here is a primer on each:

*Criminalization:* The dominant carceral discourse tends to focus on deviant, punishable individuals, so called "criminals," who are deemed responsible for the problem of "crime." As a corrective, abolitionists speak rather of "criminalization;" that is, the legal and extra-legal processes by which certain sectors of the population are marked as problems and subjected to state-sponsored surveillance, control, and premature death. As a primary symptom that serves reproduce the conditions of carceral capitalism, systemic criminalization takes place in poor urban communities of color, in rural white communities, and among other communities. For the purposes of this research project, we will concern ourselves especially with the criminalization of patients and others by UR's Department of Public Safety.

*Decarceration:* We are living in a moment of decarceration. What precisely do we mean? We are hoping to find out. For sure, shifts in capital, ideology, law, and administration have led to a dramatic reduction of people incarcerated by the state of New York. In 2019 the town of Mt. Morris suffered a prison closure. In communities like Albion—which like Attica and like Mt Morris formerly—has two prisons, prison personnel worry that the next wave of closures might take their job too. Meanwhile, in Albany and in Rochester, anti-carceral organizers are pushing to further reduce the number of people in prison and in jail, and to #defund the police. Will the present era of decarceration "end mass incarceration" or, as it has before, will the carceral state absorb critique and emerge as strong as ever? What do these struggles look like on the ground? Toward what horizons are would-be decarcerators pushing? How are the defenders of the status quo marshalling in opposition?

*Land* Before there were prisons there were mountains and streams, forests and farmland. What role has a given prison played within the environmental history of the town and region in which it was sited? How has a prison come to be and remain on the land where it sits and how has its history dovetailed with regional histories of infrastructure, agriculture and industry? How might we measure at the local level the ecological impact of mass incarceration? How might we work to ensure that after prisons are gone the land might become a viable home for human and non-human life?

*Love* The American carceral state is produced and reproduced by political coalitions, economic forces, and ideological formations. Where it is lived, it is stitched together most of all by kinship formations. Blood kinship is paradigmatic: a boy raised by a correctional officer father comes to associate “being a man” with working as a CO; a mother in the Bronx traverses the state by bus to visit her incarcerated son. Kinship is not limited to the family, however. Unions, churches, grass-roots organizing groups, and higher-educational institutions each foster unique forms of kinship. What forms do such kinship groupings take in and around a prison town? How do prison-town kinship groups sustain the prison? How does the prison sustain or impede these groups?

### Weekly writing assignments

Your weekly writing assignment is due on the blackboard discussion board by the time you go to sleep Sunday night. Initially, 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 to? 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. Each instructor will make a point of replying to three posts each week prior to class. We will come to class ready to discuss your posts, and you should too.

Your writing assignments will shift to research assignments. We will discuss these more in the weeks ahead.

### Further notes:

- We continue to live in trying times. Your instructors are committed to a pedagogical practice that errs on the side of humaneness. Doing good work requires discipline, and we will do what we can to foster a structure conducive to good work. Should things get tough, however, you will find us to be eager to accommodate.
- 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](mailto: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.
- 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>

## Course Schedule

- 8/30 Introduction  
[Attica](#) (1973) and [The Prison in 12 Landscapes](#) (2016) (excerpts)
- 9/6 No class, Labor Day  
Recommended: Watch the above films in their entirety
- 9/10 EVENT: "Attica, 50 Years Later" Hawkins Carlson, 5:00-6:30
- 9/13 Criminalization and decarceration  
Burton, "To Protect and Serve Whiteness"  
Story, "Rural Extractions"  
Pearson, "Work without Labor, Life in the Surround of a Rural Prison Town"  
Schenwar and Law, "Beyond Alternatives"  
Hurley, "[How the Pandemic Became an Unplanned Experiment in Abolishing the Child Welfare System](#)"  
McElroy, Whittaker, and Weber, "[Prison Tech Comes Home](#)"  
Doughty and Dubler, "Prison Towns and Prison Culture in the United States." Proposal to the National Science Foundation (August, 2020)
- 9/20 Land and Love  
Hall, 2020, *A Prison in the Woods*, "Introduction" and "Attica of the Adirondacks"  
Comfort, "'On-Line' at San Quentin," from *Doing Time Together: Love and Family in the Shadow of the Prison*, 21-64  
Burton. 2015. "[Fieldnotes on the Gendered Labor of Prison Visitation.](#)" *Anthropolitea*  
Morrell, 2021. "Hometown Prison: Whiteness, Safety, and Prison Work in Upstate NY State"  
Story and Prins, "[A Green New Deal for Decarceration](#)"
- Complete the online initial certification course:  
"The Office for Human Subject Protection (OHSP) at the University of Rochester (UR) requires all study team members to successfully complete human subjects training through an on-line program called the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI Program) prior to conducting any human subject research."  
Go here: <http://www.rochester.edu/ohsp/education/certification/initialCertification.html>  
Click "Instructions for Registering and Completing Human Subjects Training." Register for a CITI account. Then follow the directions. Select Social/ Behavioral/Educational for the training module. Complete it until you have scored at least 85% to pass.
- 9/27 Research assignment 1: Semi-structured interview (DPS criminalization)  
Readings: Weiss, *Learning from Strangers*, Chpt 3-4, Preparing for Interviewing and Interviewing
- 10/4 Research Assignment 2: Participant observation  
Readings: Emerson, *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes* excerpts
- 10/11 No class, Fall Break
- 10/18 **Nicole Fleetwood, Two Icons lecture, 3pm** (class as usual, we will watch virtual exhibit)  
Reading: *Marking Time*  
Research assignment 3: Ritual participant observation
- 10/25 Research assignment 4: Social Drama

Readings: Selection of 2019 and 2020 student social drama fieldnotes

- 11/1 Research assignment 5: Document analysis  
Readings : TBD
- 11/8 Research assignment 6: Semi structured interview  
Readings:TBD
- 11/15 Research assignment 7: Researcher's Choice  
Readings TBD:
- 11/22 Research assignment 8: Researcher's Choice  
Readings TBD
- 11/29 Final Project workshop  
Research assignment: Makeup / extra trip if needed
- 12/6 Final project workshop

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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