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Incarceration Nation
AAAS 183/HIST112/PSCI 224/RELC 183
M/W/F 10:25-11:15
Syllabus draft: January 21, 2026

Incarceration Nation

How does a country with five percent of the world's population, a country that nominally values freedom above all else, come to engage nearly a quarter of the world's incarcerated people? In this survey course we investigate the history of imprisonment in the United States—as theorized and as practiced—from the founding of the republic to the present day. Special attention is paid to the politics, economics, race politics, and religious logics of mass incarceration; and to efforts afoot to push back against mass incarceration, both nationally and locally, and to prefigure an abolitionist future.

Course objectives and learning outcomes

- Think critically about the history and ongoing practices of human caging in the United States
- Denaturalize, critique and historicize discourses about “what prisons are for”
- Engage critically and practically with prison abolition as movement, stance, and horizon in this moment of acute crisis
- Exercise the moral imagination and strain toward the possibility of a more just justice
- By the end of the course, you should have more expansive historical, philosophical, and practical conceptualizations of prisons and the State, safety and justice

Course format and expectations

This course has two weekly lectures and small-group discussions on Fridays. This course is offered with support of a course operating grant from the Center for Community Engagement and is designed to foster decarceration-minded community-engagement opportunities. *The Center for Community Engagement supports classes that connect students and communities in the classroom. This is a community-engaged course that counts toward the [Certificate of Achievement in Community-Engaged Learning](#). If you are interested in learning more about community-engaged courses, you can check out the [course list](#). Any questions can be emailed to cel@ur.rochester.edu*

Attendance: Attendance is required and will be recorded. You are free to miss three class sessions without explanation or apology. Barring the documentation of extreme circumstance, each additional absence will result in a one-third-of-a-letter-grade deduction to the attendance portion of your final grade.

Reading Assignments: Reading assignments are substantive in depth and in heft, but we have done our best to limit assignments to 100 or so required pages per week. This is the kind of course in which sustained, engaged attendance goes a long, long way, but if you are to get out of this class what it has to offer, it is also essential that you carve out time for attentive reading. All

reading assignments on the syllabus are for Mondays and Wednesdays. Instructors reserve the right to amend assignments and to post short additional reading assignments on the fly. Any such changes will be noted in class and via Blackboard announcement.

Class Participation: Attendance and active listening during lecture are important features of class participation, and we will do our best to make some time for questions and discussion. To facilitate engagement, the use of digital devices will not be permitted in class. Two exceptions: every class one person will take “minutes” to be posted for those unable to attend, and the minutes taker can use a digital device. Second, if you require the use of a digital device as a disability accommodation, please let me know, and I will certainly accommodate. For lectures, please sit in the rows below the back door. The lion’s share of class participation, however, will take place elsewhere. It will take place in your Friday small group and outside of class by means of community engagement. Participation in small group can take different shapes, but as a benchmark, you should look to engage vocally in each small-group session. Teaching assistants will work to foster a space in small group that is conducive to engagement and otherwise lower barriers to participation. More on community engagement below.

Reading Response Posts: Weekly reading response posts will be posted on Blackboard and can be accessed either by clicking on “Discussions.” Posts are due by 5:00 pm on Thursday. As of the start of Friday’s session, that week’s discussion board will be closed. You are entitled to miss two posts over the course of the semester without penalty. Each subsequent missed post will result in a one-third of a letter grade to the response post portion of your final grade. Your first post is due prior to class this Friday.

Posts should be in the ballpark of 250-300 words and should probably take roughly 30 minutes to complete. You are free to adopt whatever form you wish for your post, but here is a good default template:

Choose an *analytic* from one of the week’s assigned readings. By “analytic” I mean a critical category that the author uses. Choose an analytic that seems important to the author’s argument and/or to the historical and/or conceptual terrain that they are attempting to map. Quote a usage or two directly from the text. In your own words, explain what the category means, how it functions in the author’s argument, and/or what it helps illuminate about some facet of incarceration in the United States. *Think* with the category. That is, identify other critical categories and/or other things that this analytic might help to illuminate. Think about the category’s implications and/or limitations. Lastly and most importantly, pose a question provoked by your thinking with and about this category that you would like to tackle in small-group discussion.

Our goal is for each timely post to receive feedback from a teaching assistant. We would absolutely love it if you were to engage with one another’s posts as well.

Academic honesty: We will not be using AI tools for any aspect of this class: not to assist with reading, writing, or evaluation. AI may well have positive use values for learning, but whatever those may be, the learning we will do here will be of other varieties. In choosing to take this class, you affirm that you will not use these AI tools.

Exams: There will be two exams, each of them in-class, the first on February 20th, the second on April 3rd. Exams will consist of three components: a) passages for which you will need to identify the author; b) key terms for you to identify and contextualize in a paragraph; and c) a brief essay.

Community engagement: This is a community-engaged course and is generously supported with a course operating grant from the good folks at the Center for Community Engagement. Pursuant to CCE's criteria, the course exposes students to issues of inequality or unmet needs in community, and course material is taught in collaboration with or adjacent to a set of community partners. Ongoing community partners for this course include the [Center for Community Alternatives](#), [Release Aging People in Prison \(RAPP Campaign\)](#), [Free the People ROC](#), the Monroe County Public Defenders, the National Lawyers Guild.

My expectation this time around is that every student completes this course as a community-engaged course. The requirement is to soulfully participate in the work of one or more community organizations, in the community or on campus, whose work, broadly conceived, is allied with efforts to reduce violence, foster safety, and/or prefigure a future in which no one is rendered disposable. Such community engagement can be done in conjunction with one of the above community partners, with a different community group, in conjunction with a student group on campus, or in some other collaborative way, whether standardized or *ad hoc*. A preliminary account of your projected community engagement for this class is due to your small-group facilitators on February 6th.

As an hour expectation, 20 hours over the course of the semester seems like a reasonable floor. The goal of your instructors is to foster and facilitate access to community-engagement opportunities. In lieu of a final exam then, you will write up a brief (250-300ish word) critical reflection of the activities you have undertaken. That is, we will want to hear about what you have done and what your takeaways are for future endeavors.

Grades: Final grades will be determined according to the following formula: Attendance (20%); Class participation including community engagement (20%); Weekly writing assignments (20%); First exam (20%); second exam (20%).

The spirit of this class: What might "abolitionist education" look like? Is it possible to foster a space for abolitionist learning within a corporate university? These are open questions, which we take very seriously, and which we continue to investigate in practice. In the months ahead we will do our best to provide the centripetal force necessary for rigorous, disciplined, collaborate inquiry to take place. Simultaneously, we will do our best to be compassionate and adaptative. We are avid about the practices of inquiry and the cultivation of solidarity, and we believe that abolition has much to offer to collective survival and flourishing. Complementarily, while we are reluctant to employ carceral pedagogical devices of surveillance and punishment, we have learned that students do better with clear expectations backed up with grade-based incentive structures.

Additional Notes

*As per university guidelines, the credit hour policy of the College tabulates a four-credit course as including 150 instructional minutes, 50 minutes of equivalent activities, and 480 minutes of supplementary student work per week.

* All assignments and activities associated with this course must be performed in accordance

with University of Rochester's code of [Academic Honesty](#)

* We encourage you to use the tutors at the [Writing, Speaking, and Argument Program](#)

* Supplementary learning supports can be found in the [Learning Center](#)

* 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 a disability, please contact the [Office of Disability Resources](#)

Book available for purchase and on to be placed on reserve

Jackie Wang, *Carceral Capitalism* (Semiotext(e), 2018)

Itinerary

The itinerary that follows is subject to amendment. Changes to assignments will be prominently noted in class and announced on blackboard. Guests and supplementary events are supported by a Course Operating Grant grants from the Center for Community Engagement.

UNIT I INTRODUCTIONS

Week 1 What are prisons for?

Jan 23 Frank Schmallegger, *Criminal Justice*, 250-254*
Angela Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?* 9-21*
Mariame Kaba, "So You're Thinking About Becoming an Abolitionist"*
Recommended: Timothy Crimmins, "Incarceration as Incapacitation: An Intellectual History"*

Week 2 The State of the State

Jan 26 NY State Sen. Julia Salazar, *Built on Brutality*, 1-68*
Recommended: Jennifer Gonnerman, "A Year of Convulsions in New York's Prisons"*

Jan 28 The Geography of Mass Incarceration in New York State*
Built on Brutality, Appendix 29, 251-254*

Jan 30 Small group

UNIT II THE CARCERAL MODERN

Week 3 Beginnings: A Genealogical Approach

Feb 2 Norman Johnson, *Forms of Constraint*, 67-87*
Michel Foucault, "Panopticism," from *Discipline and Punish*, 195-228*
Recommended: Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History"*

Feb 4	Smith, <i>The Prison in the American Imagination</i> , 1-23* Jennifer Janofsky, “Hopelessly Hardened,”* Charles Dickens on Solitary Confinement * Albert Green Jackson poem to Elizabeth V. Elwell *
Feb 6	Small group Preliminary community engagement proposal due in small group
<u>Week 4</u>	<u>Nineteenth-Century Contestations</u>
Feb 9	Jennifer Graber, <i>The Furnace of Affliction</i> , 73-101* Rebecca McClennan, <i>The Crisis of Imprisonment</i> , 53-86* Austin Reed, <i>The Life and Adventures of a Haunted Convict</i> , 153-159
Feb 11	Sarah Haley, <i>No Mercy Here</i> , 17-57*
Feb 13	Small group
<u>Week 5</u>	<u>Empire, Knowledge, Power</u>
Feb 16	Kelly Lytle Hernández, <i>City of Inmates</i> , 1-15* Brianna Nofil, <i>The Migrant’s Jail</i> , 1-15* Leonard Peltier, <i>Prison Writings</i> , 3-12* Recommended: Stuart Schrader, <i>Badges without Borders</i> , 1-25*
Feb 18	Nicole Rafter, <i>Creating Born Criminals</i> , 93-132* Recommended: Khalil Gibran Muhammad, <i>The Condemnation of Blackness</i> , 35-87*
Feb 20	TEST
Unit III	MASS INCARCERATION AND/OR THE PRISON INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX
<u>Week 6</u>	<u>After <i>The New Jim Crow</i></u>
February 23	Michelle Alexander, <i>The New Jim Crow</i> , 20-57* James Forman, Jr., “Racial Critiques of Mass Incarceration: Beyond the New Jim Crow”*
February 25	Orisanmi Burton, <i>The Tip of the Spear</i> , 1-19* George Jackson, “On Withdrawal”*
February 27	Small group

<u>Week 7</u>	<u>The Politics of “Mass Incarceration”</u>
March 2	Marie Gottschalk, <i>Caught</i> , 1-22* Mona Lynch, “Mass Incarceration, Legal Change, and Locale”* Recommended: Elizabeth Hinton, <i>From the War on Poverty to the War on Crime</i> , 1-26*
March 4	Dubler and Lloyd, “The Political Theology of Mass Incarceration”* Assata Shakur, <i>Assata</i> , Chapter 9, 141-147* Recommended: King, “Letter from Birmingham Jail”* Recommended: Christophe Ringer, <i>Necropolitics</i> , 1-16*
March 6	Small group
<u>Week 8</u>	<u>The Political Economy of Punitive Neoliberalism</u>
March 16	Ruth Wilson Gilmore, <i>Golden Gulag</i> , 5-17, 88-127*
March 18	Loic Wacquant, <i>Punishing the Poor</i> , 41-75* Jalil Muntaqim, “We Are Our Own Liberators”* Recommended:
March 20	Small group
<u>Week 9</u>	<u>Carceral Capitalism</u>
March 23	Jackie Wang, <i>Carceral Capitalism</i> , 11-150
March 25	Wang, <i>Carceral Capitalism</i> , 260-322 Susan Burton, <i>Becoming Ms. Burton</i> , Chapter 14* Recommended: Wang, 151-259
March 27	Small group
<u>Week 10</u>	<u>ICE and the Homeland Empire</u>
March 30	Andrea Pitzer, <i>One Long Night</i> , Introduction Nancy Hiemstra & Dierdre Conlon, <i>Immigration Detention Inc</i> , Chap. 1* Recommended: Pitzer, <i>One Long Night</i> , Chapter 10* Recommended: Mohamedou Ould Slahi, <i>Guantánamo Diary</i> , Chapter 1*
April 1	Nikhil Pal Singh, “Homeland Empire”* A Letter from Palestinian activist Mahmoud Khalil*
April 3	TEST

UNIT IV

TOWARD AN ABOLITIONIST HORIZON

Week 11

Transforming Justice

April 6 Nils Christie, “Conflicts as Property”
Danielle Sered, *Until We Reckon*, 1-49*

April 8 Mariame Kaba, *We Do This ‘Til We Free Us*, 132-162*
Robert Altland, “A Path of Penance”*

April 10 Small group

Week 12

Bail Reform

April 13 Maya Schenwar & Victoria Law, *Prison By Any Other Name*, 1-24*
Kay Whitlock & Nancy Heitzeg, *Carceral Con*, 102-124*
Jennifer Gonnerman, “Before the Law”*

April 15 René Ropac, “Testing the Long-Term Impact of Bail Reform Across New York State: A Quasi-Experimental Evaluation”

April 17 Small group

Week 13

#Defundthepolice

April 20 Alex Vitale, *The End of Policing*, 1-30*
Mariame Kaba And Andrea Ritchie, *No More Police*, 41-70*

April 22 Molly Osberg, “What Can Zohran Mamdani do to Change the NYPD?”
Alex Vitale, “Zohran Mamdani Must Confront the NYPD. Here’s What He Can Do.”
Other pieces that have not yet been written*

April 24 Small group

Week Fourteen

What Would it mean to Decarcerate a Campus?

April 27 U of R Department of Public Safety documents*
Dubler and Doughty, “What Would it Mean to Decarcerate a Campus?”*

April 29 Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons*, 25-43*
Miles Horton, *The Long Haul*, 130-143*
Jimmy Santiago Baca, “[Coming into Language](#)”*

May 1 Small group

May 7

Community-engagement write-up due at 5:00 pm

* Available on Blackboard under Readings