

PRISON ABOLITION: ANTI-RACIST & FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES



Instructor: Amir Aziz
Level: Intermediate- to advanced-level undergraduate course
Enrollment size: 20-25 students, once or twice weekly
Keywords: Gender and sexuality; Ethnic studies; Women's studies
Disability studies; Carceral studies



Abolition is about presence, not absence. It is about building life-affirming institutions.
- Ruth Wilson Gilmore

COURSE DESCRIPTION

Abolition is a diversified concept and practice: While definitions vary based on context, the core of abolition entails building a society without the shackles of imprisonment and policing. Structures of incarceration maintain systems of social extermination, civil death, and rightlessness, producing harm and violence against historically-disentitled communities while damaging familial and kinship bonds.

Abolition calls for undoing carceral structures such as prisons, immigration detention, psychiatric institutions, border control, and extra-territorial prisons. As a process of creation, abolition envisions non-punitive strategies of survival and transformation, rejecting violence as responses to social issues.

This course offers students a comprehensive historical and theoretical foundation of abolitionist thought and advocacy, focusing on the U.S. and its transnational dimensions. We will explore issues of mass incarceration, policing, and gendered/racialized carceral structures that impact women, Black, Indigenous, and people of color, trans, queer, and gender non-conforming communities, Muslims, and migrants.

We will ask: What are the historical and political factors involved in creating the U.S. Prison-Industrial Complex? What conditions have sedimented an acceptance of a punitive policing and a so-called carceral 'common sense' in the U.S.? What intellectual and activist practices of care might we develop via feminist-, queer-, and trans-of-color abolitionist critiques of incarceration?

The course comprises 13 weeks of class, featuring a balance of lively lectures and discussion sessions. Students will embark on a semester-long advocacy project, where they will learn how to advocate for individuals in immigration detention, wrongful convictions, and other abolitionist interventions.

COURSE LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Compare and examine historical and contemporary trends in abolitionist theory and practice.
2. Analyze how formations of gender, sexuality, race/ethnicity, disability, class, religion, (im)migration experience, and legal status shape structural institutions and social experiences.
3. Identify, discuss, and apply concepts and practices rooted in feminist-, queer-, and anti-racist theory and disability justice to analyze a range of issues and writings related to abolition.

COURSE ASSESSMENT

Students are assessed via weekly Class Preps, bi-weekly tasks, and a semester-long advocacy project.

1. Class Prep and In-Class Participation: 40%

- Students will prepare a “Class Prep” submitted online prior to class. Class Prep is 2 pages and consists of: (a) a summary, (b) a glossary of key concepts, and (c) 3 questions students have about the material.

2. Bi-weekly Tasks: 20%

- Students will complete an online task—a short-essay quiz or discussion forum—that covers current and previous weeks. The task evaluates student ability to compare/contrast topics of different weeks.

3. Semester-Long Advocacy Practicum Project: 40%

- In this hands-on practicum project, students choose to work on one advocacy case or issue, such as individuals needing immigration detention relief or wrongful conviction cases. Students will learn to work with and advocate on behalf of the individual, drawing from course readings and materials in feminist, queer, and anti-racist abolitionist praxis to frame their advocacy’s plans of action.

COURSE SCHEDULE

WEEK 1 – Introductions & Course Overview

WEEK 2 – Abolitionist Origins: A Historical Reckoning

a) Angela Davis, “Civil Rights, Slavery,” b) Sarah Haley, “Convict Leasing, (Re)Production”

WEEK 3 – Abolition and Black Feminist Genealogies

a) Saidiya Hartman, “Redressing the Pained Body,” b) Sarah Haley, “Race and the Sexual Politics of Prison Reform,” c) Katherine McKittrick, “The Last Place They Thought Of”

WEEK 4 – Mass Incarceration, Labor, and the Modern Prison-Industrial Complex

a) Angela Davis, “The Prison Industrial Complex,” b) Ruth Wilson Gilmore, “Globalisation and U.S. Prison Growth,” c) Ava DuVernay, *13th* documentary

WEEK 5 – Police Abolition Now!

a) Monique Morris, *Pushout: The Criminalization of Black Girls in Schools*, b) Andrea Ritchie, “Policing Paradigms,” c) Stephen Dillon, “Desire, Police Terror, and the Affect of Queer Feminist Futures”

WEEK 6 – Feminist Abolitions: Against Carceral Feminism

a) INCITE!, “Statement on Gender Violence,” b) Elizabeth Bernstein, “The Sexual Politics of the ‘New Abolitionism,’” c) Rose Braz, “Kinder, Gentler, Gender Responsive Cages”

WEEK 7 – Trans- & Queer-of-Color Abolitionist Praxis

a) C. Riley Snorton & Jin Haritaworn, “Trans Necropolitics,” b) Alison Rose Reed, excerpts, *Love & Abolition: The Social Life of Black Queer Performance*, c) Liat Ben-Moshe, excerpts, *Decarcerating Disability*

WEEK 8 – Decolonial Feminisms and Queer Indigenous Abolition

a) Kalaniopua Young, “From a Native Trans Daughter,” b) *Abolition on Stolen Land* videos, c) Xhercis Méndez, “A Transformative Justice and Decolonial Feminist Approach to Campus Sexual Assault”

WEEK 9 – Sexuality, Empire, Borders

a) Eithne Lubhéid, “‘Looking Like a Lesbian’: Sexual Monitoring at the U.S.-Mexico Border,” b) A. Naomi Paik, “Haitian Refugees and Guantánamo’s Carceral Quarantine”

WEEK 10 – #AbolishICE: Against Immigration Detention and Family Separation

a) Ellen Goosenberg Kent, *Torn Apart* documentary, b) Martha D. Escobar, “Reinforcing Gendered Racial Boundaries,” c) César Cuauhtémoc García Hernández, “Abolishing Immigration Prisons”

WEEK 11 – Sexual/Gendered Politics of Anti-Muslim Racism & the So-Called ‘War on Terror’

a) Sara Farris, “Femonationalism, Neoliberalism,” b) Lakhdar Boumediène and Mustafa Ait Idir, excerpts, *Witnesses of the Unseen: Seven Years in Guantánamo*, c) Jasbir Puar, “On Torture: Abu Ghraib”

WEEK 12 – Queer & Transfeminist Refusals and Resistance

a) Morgan Bassichis et al., “Building an Abolitionist Trans & Queer Movement,” b) Tourmaline & Dean Spade, *No One Is Disposable* videos, c) Karma Chávez, “Queer Migration Manifestos”

WEEK 13 – Abolition Futures

a) Mariame Kaba, excerpts, *We Do This ‘til We Free Us*, b) Angela Davis et al. excerpts, *Abolition. Feminism. Now.*, c) Barnard Center for Research on Women, *Building Accountable Communities* videos