

Claire Potter  
The New School  
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office: 79 Fifth Ave, 1625  
[potterc@newschool.edu](mailto:potterc@newschool.edu)  
Online

**NHIS2420: What is the Purpose of Incarceration?**  
**Online**  
**Fall 2017**

Using an interdisciplinary humanities approach, this course asks: what is the purpose of incarceration? What have been its goals across time, cultures and states? When have incarcerated people turned the sites of their confinement to the purpose of liberation? Are prisons similar in their purpose to other “total institutions” (Goffman, 1961) such as concentration camps, black sites, penal colonies, asylums, treatment centers, juvenile homes, stockades, boarding schools, ghettos, and workhouses? In addition to punishment, incarceration can be a vehicle for collecting debts, conveying shame, forcing contemplation, articulating reforms, extracting information, protecting from self-harm, assembling labor, and restraining dissent. Sites of incarceration can also become sites for protest and ethical connection.

When we examine incarceration over time, and across cultures, do other purposes reveal themselves? Because it speaks directly to questions of liberty, reason and civilization, removing living souls from social life can be seen as both a reproach and an incitement to a publicly engaged humanities practice.

At a time in which many in the United States are calling for prison abolition, and others wish to impose a “law and order” regime, it seems fitting to ask: *what is the purpose of incarceration?*

This course is funded by a grant from the [National Endowment for the Humanities Enduring Questions program](#).

**Books**

A central aspect of our work in this course will be to answer our question -- “What is the purpose of incarceration” -- through close reading, discussion and evidence-based argument. Because of this, it is extremely important for you to have direct access to our central texts, and for all of us be working from the same editions so that we can respond to each other with precision.

Please note: not reading, or substituting study guides or notes you find on the Internet, will mean that you will do poorly in the course. Worse, you will be bored and not learn anything, *which we do not want*.

Although they will be on reserve at the University Center library, please purchase

these books and have print, or Kindle, copies directly available to you as you participate in exercises and discussions. I have listed our books below, with ISBN numbers. These books, in the same editions, are also available used.

There will be links to all other readings in the Canvas module for the day that they are due.

Author	Title	ISBN	New	Kindle
Mohamedou Ould Slahi	<a href="#">Guantanamo Diary</a>	978-0316389259	13.59	9.99
Mumia Abu-Jamal	<a href="#">Live from Death Row</a>	978-0380727667	9.95	None
Levi	<a href="#">Survival in Auschwitz</a>	978-1463525569	14.95	6.99

### Learning Outcomes

You should leave this class understanding:

- How to do a close reading of a text;
- How to formulate a good argument;
- How to make and defend your argument;
- How to think critically across space and time to answer your question.

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### Introduction | August 28-September 3

#### Module 1.1 | September 5-September 10

- Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *Memoirs from the House of the Dead*, 1-96.
- Estelle Reel, "Report of the Superintendent of Indian Schools, Salem (Chimewa) School, Oregon," *Report to the United States Commissioner of Indian Affairs*, (1906)

#### Module 1.2 | September 11-September 17

- Harriet A. Jacobs (Linda Brent), *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, (1861), selections.

#### Module 1.3 | September 18-September 24

- Mary Rowlandson, *Narrative of the Captivity*, selections.

## **September 24 | Preliminary answer due (250-300 words)**

In 250-300 words, offer a preliminary answer to our question given what we have learned so far. This is the core of the paper you will write and revise over the course of the semester. Your paper should include:

- A definite answer framed in a direct, one sentence statement "The purpose of incarceration is....."
- Sample evidence from what we have read so far that supports this answer.
- A statement of one or two sentences that anticipates how another person might challenge your argument.

## **MODULE 2**

*Rationale and questions:*

In addition to the questions we addressed in the last three weeks, Dostoyevsky raised questions about dissent, symbolic power, confinement and physical harm that we will expand on in the second module of the course. Here our focus will be: how does incarceration punish, on whose behalf, and who benefits? In these weeks, lectures will focus on forms of incarceration that have a clear and urgent purpose when conceived, but which may then become transformed, thwarted, or repurposed. Is it possible for the punishments associated with incarceration to relinquish or exceed their original purpose?

### **Module 2.1 | September 25-October 1**

- Mohamedou Ould Slahi, chapter 1, *Guantánamo Diary*, 3-70.
- Testimony of Susan Rosenberg, Formerly incarcerated person for the Senate Judiciary Committee's Subcommittee on the Constitution, Civil Rights and Human Rights: Reassessing Solitary Confinement II: The Human Rights, Fiscal, and Public Safety Consequences, February 25, 2014.

### **Module 2.2 | October 2-October 8**

- Mohamedou Ould Slahi, chapters 2-4, *Guantánamo Diary*, 71-190.
- Franz Kafka, "[In the Penal Colony](#)" (1914). Trans. Ian Johnston.

### **Module 2.3 | October 9-October 15**

- Mohamedou Ould Slahi, *Guantánamo Diary*, chapters 5-7, 191-372.
- V.I. Lenin, "Class, Society and the State," from *The State and Revolution*, 5-15.

*Bring your expanded answer to class.*

## **October 15 | Expanded Answer Due (1000 words)**

Expanding your first paper to 1000 words, work the material we have read in the second unit into your essay. In this exercise:

- choose evidence from our newer readings that supports the answer to the question you have settled on in your preliminary answer.
- Then, choose evidence that potentially challenges the answer to the question you have settled on.
- In a final paragraph: do you think there are viable alternative answers than the one you settles on? If so, what are they? Alternatively, does your new thinking cause you to want to modify or expand your answer?

## **MODULE 3**

*Rationale and questions:*

In the third part of the course, we explore the ways that individuals who have been incarcerated answer the question: how did I get here? Lectures will not only explore the idea of reform, and how societies and states have imagined that sites of incarceration can change people; but also the reverberations that incarceration has on a single life, a family network, and a community. If there are ethical and existential transformations that incarceration facilitates, can a prison, hospital or concentration camp also a privileged site for understanding human nature? Does the deep contemplation that prison makes possible create the possibility of moral insight that has been previously obscure?

### **Module 3.1 | October 16-October 22**

- Oscar Wilde, *De Profundis* (1905)
- Bayard Rustin, "I Must Resist," letter to the draft board, November 16 1943.

### **Module 3.2 | October 23 - October 29**

- Kate Millet, *The Loony Bin Trip* (1990) -- excerpts
- Angel Y. Davis, *The Autobiography*, 1-73.

### **Module 3.3 | October 30-November 5**

- Primo Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz* (1947)

## **November 5 | Expanded answer II Due**

*This draft should be between 1500 and 1750 words. Once again, you should work new materials from this section into your paper that both support and challenge the*

answer to the question that you arrived at in the last version. In addition:

- Include another classmate's answer in your paper, represent that person's argument fully and fairly
- Show why your answer is a more compelling answer than either the challenge you posed yourself in the last version of the paper and your classmate's answer.

## **MODULE 4**

*Rationale and questions:*

The final three weeks of the course will ask: are there ethical statements and acts of conscience that acquire particular force when made from a site of incarceration? And under what conditions -- the threat of execution, harm to self or society, the possibility of access to enhanced humanness -- is incarceration an ethical choice? Our final primary text will be , an account of her work fighting the death penalty in the United States. Bringing the execution of humans into our conversation allows students to think about whether a lifetime of incarceration might nurture, rather than destroy human values, and whether there is value in facilitating reconciliation between offenders and those they have harmed. Secondary readings will draw on work from intellectuals who have resorted to self-incarceration as a means of preserving their humanness in the face of violence, as well as those who have recognized that incarceration can be a force in creating ethical connection and social change.

### **Module 4.1 | November 6-November 12**

- Mumia Abu-Jamal, *Live from Death Row* (1996)
- George Jackson, *Soledad Brother* (1970), 21-35, 45-51.

### **Module 4.2 | November 13-November 19**

- Mumia Abu-Jamal, *Live from Death Row* (1996)
- Henry David Thoreau, *Civil Disobedience*, (1849)

**THANKSGIVING: NO CLASS**

### **Module 4.3 | November 27-December 3**

- Sister Helen Prejean, *Dead Man Walking* (selections)
- Martin Luther King, "Letter from Birmingham City Jail," (1963)

***December 3 | Expanded Draft III due***

*Once again, you will rewrite your paper, but it may be no longer than 2000 words. This*

time:

- Work new readings into your answer
- Consider a second answer posed by a classmate, representing it fully and fairly.

*Edit your own arguments, making them more concise, and using footnotes if necessary to remove secondary argument, explanations and evidence from the main narrative of the paper. Footnotes do not count as part of your total word count.*

## **Conclusion | December 4 – December 12 | Our Findings**

### ***December 17 | Final, Copyedited Draft of Paper Due***

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## **University Resources**

There are numerous resources at The New School to help you succeed: they include your professor (me), your academic advisor, and the offices listed below.

This includes:

- Meeting with the professor. Please [email me](#) to set up an appointment. I prefer to do this during business hours, but if your schedule precludes this, I can be flexible. Please don't wait until you are desperate! Part of my job is to help students outside of class, consult about the broader mission of your education, or just go have coffee!
- [The library](#). Librarians can be particularly helpful in guiding you through any research required for this course, how to use a data base, and how to search for the exact source you need -- and in fact, they are paid to do this for faculty and students alike! As a New School student, you may also access all library services at [New York University's Bobst Library \(Links to an external site.\)](#). Remember that Internet research is not always the best way to get what you need: Google and other search engines tend to give you what you already know, not what you don't know, or specialized research that best suits your needs.
- [The University Learning Center](#). Like librarians, learning center professionals are there to help you do your work. Again, you don't have to be struggling, only the desire to improve some aspect of your work: taking better notes, writing more lucidly, and reading faster would be a few of the basic skills you might want to improve.
- [Disability Services](#). In keeping with the university's policy of providing equal access for students with disabilities, any student with a disability who needs academic accommodations is welcome to meet with me privately. All conversations will be kept confidential. Students requesting any accommodations will also need to contact Student Disability Service (SDS). SDS will conduct an intake and, if appropriate, the Director will provide an academic accommodation notification letter for you to bring to me. At that point, I will review the letter with you and discuss these accommodations in relation to this

course. If you have already been diagnosed with cognitive or physical disability, this is where you go to ensure that you have equal access to an education. If you have ever struggled with school, seen a pattern in those struggles, or are frustrated in your attempts to plan, work effectively, or stay organized, you might want to consult with this office to see if they can support you. Equal access to education for all disabilities may include: extra time for graded work, an assistant to help you, or other accommodations.

## **Grading and Expectations**

Every student is expected to have done all the required reading and come to virtual discussions prepared to discuss it. Graduate students will want to find the time to explore the recommended readings as well. On the days where there is a featured tool, you will be expected to come to class having explored it and thought about its uses.

*You must participate fully in discussions every week.* Missing discussion for the week, even if you complete other exercises, will be counted as having been absent from class. Your grade will be lowered for any absence, but should you miss class more than twice, you will be asked to withdraw.

Each assignment will be accompanied by an explanation of how points are awarded or deducted. The total number of points available in this course will exceed 100: the letter grade awarded at the end of the semester will be determined by the percentage of points you earn.

A	93%-100%	C	74%-76%
A-	90%-93%	C-	70%-73%
B+	87%-89%	D+	67%-69%
B	84%-86%	D	64%-66%
B-	80%-83%	D-	60%-63%
C+	77%-79%	F	> 60%

Extra points may be awarded for high quality participation in discussions.