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Internment, Immigrant Detention, and the Imagined Imperiled Whiteness of U.S. Citizenship

Miranda Hallett | January 20, 2017

The immigration and citizenship laws that prevail in the 21st century United States — as well as the enforcement of them — reflect Eurocentric racial hierarchies and help create and reproduce a white-majority nation.

While schoolchildren hold a basic understanding of how slavery and Jim Crow segregation produced persistent racial divides and inequality in U.S. history, they are far less familiar with the story of how the pervasive legal exclusion, marginalization, and persecution of Asian and Latin American immigrants (and birthright citizens with Asian or Latin American heritage) has played a key role in maintaining white dominance in the United States of America.

The black-white divide is the most polarized and historically most central racial divide in the U.S., yet other groups aside from African-Americans have also been racialized and represented as threats to the white majority. It is enlightening to compare the long legacy of racism against other groups, including the mid-20th century internment of Japanese-Americans, to the present moment of anti-immigrant backlash. The xenophobic backlash of the present has largely targeted immigrants from Latin America and south Asia as well as U.S.-born descendants of such immigrants.

The panic over the “yellow peril” of the 19th century saw Chinese immigrants — and their U.S.-born children — driven violently out of towns across the American West. This white supremacist terror, inflicted by the mainstream of white society and not by a fringe group, foreshadowed the creation of “sundown towns” that exiled free black families from towns and cities through acts of violence, local statutes, and racially restrictive covenants as described in sociologist James Loewen’s book “Sundown Towns.”
Parallel to the Jim Crow signs for black and white facilities across the southeast, Texas and the southwest were dotted with signs excluding “Mexicans”—a social category that included many people who were born in the United States, as well as those born in Mexican territory that was taken over by the U.S. government in the mid-1800s. Many Mexican-Americans in Arizona and other states in the southwest can rightly say “we didn’t cross the border, the border crossed us”—yet after many generations in their own homeland they are still perceived as potential foreigners and targeted by racial profiling.

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biologically non-white, each of these groups was also defined as naturally lacking some or all of the basic rights and protections of citizenship such as freedom and mobility.

Through racialization, the oppression of these communities — including disproportionate enforcement of “vagrancy” laws, incarceration, and forced labor — came to be seen by the white majority as a normal and appropriate way to manage and restrict the movement of these populations of racialized Others. The concept of being racialized as “Other” in the U.S. describes a group subjected to structural exclusion or inequality, as well as vulnerable to discrimination, assumptions of foreignness, and symbolic placement outside the dominant American culture. It’s a more accurate and analytically rich word than the word “minority,” which could simply designate a group that is not in the numerical majority in demographic terms.

One of the most dramatic examples of the persecution of U.S. citizens and residents on the basis of racialized Otherness is the internment of Japanese-Americans in concentration camps during World War II. The policy involved capture, displacement, and incarceration — just like today’s detention and deportation system for undocumented immigrants. Japanese-Americans and Japanese residents living on the West Coast or in Hawaii were notified of their imminent removal, uprooted from their lives and homes, forced to wear identification tags, and incarcerated in camps.

This system of mass incarceration shaped the lives of a generation of Japanese-American citizens who grew up enclosed in concentration camps, exiled through internal isolation in the country of their birth. The traumas of this horrifying episode in U.S. history, where a group marked by racialized status collapsed with a notion of foreign national origin — in short, of Otherness — are repeated today in the system of immigration law enforcement. Just as in the 1940s, the majority of white citizens fail to protest or perceive this injustice, becoming complicit with a form of oppression that seems normal and justified in their eyes.
After the internment of Japanese Americans from the Seattle region, barber G.S. Hante points proudly to his bigoted sign reading "We Don't Want Any Japs Back Here...EVER!" | Bettmann / Contributor / Getty Images

Scholars and activists looking at immigrant detention today emphasize the rapid expansion of enforcement, the pervasive fear experienced by people subject to the enforcement and deportation system, and the far-reaching detrimental impacts of this system not only for migrant families but for U.S. society more broadly.

Funding for immigration enforcement and border security along the U.S.-Mexico border doubled in the 1990s, then again in the first decade of the 21st century. During the same two decades more military technology was used, the numbers of immigrants incarcerated and deported grew, and immigration was redefined as a matter of “national security.” This occurred both symbolically and bureaucratically, as immigration enforcement became part of the newly formed Department of Homeland Security in the wake of the 2001 World Trade Center attacks often known as 9/11.

Profit-driven enforcement, a lack of due process for detainees, and
appalling conditions in immigrant detention centers have galvanized a new social movement to protect immigrants’ basic human rights, regardless of status, and to oppose the current practice of immigration enforcement as an unjust exercise of state power.

The impact of this inhumane system, as described in de Genova and Peutz’s The Deportation Regime, is not simply or primarily located in actual prison facilities where people are held. Similar to the pervasive terrorizing impacts of the mass incarceration regime more broadly — which disproportionately impacting people of color in the United States — the experience and the fear of detention and deportation is devastating for U.S. communities.

Expanding beyond the experiences of those actually detained through state action, the shadow of the possibility of detention extends over all who live with uncertain legal status as well as those whose racialization as Other brings their citizenship or legitimacy into question (U.S.-born Latino/as fall into this category, as well as many Asian-American communities). The expanding oppression of this system threatens democracy, undermines the potential for an inclusive society, and involves a militarization of lives in the borderzone — which includes most of us. As Todd Miller points out in Border Patrol Nation, the Border Patrol’s jurisdiction extends 100 miles inland from any international border or coastline, now covering two-thirds of the population of the country.

The regime of detention is not just about incarceration and deportability, but also reinforces the labor exploitation immigrants often suffer, and weakens access to civil rights and legal protections. What’s worse, the construction of certain racialized groups as potential interlopers, outsiders, and terrorists is a symbolic side effect of this enforcement. This symbolic construction reverberates through social worlds, fostering social exclusion and even inspiring the targeting of Latino/as for hate crimes.
under the assumption that they are “illegals” who deserve such vigilante justice.

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the circle of state repression beyond the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), acting officially under color of law, to the “force multipliers” of local sheriffs and police, and finally to private vigilantes enacting violence in the name of law. Like the internment of Japanese-Americans, the cruel and inhumane punishment and denial of legal due process to immigrant detainees depends in part on this diffuse, culturally produced narrative of racialized threat.

I am not the only one to juxtapose the internment of Japanese-Americans in the mid-20th century with the recent mass incarceration of undocumented immigrants. Carl Higbie, a prominent political supporter of the Trump administration, recognized the resonance between these two forms of state action by evoking the internment camps as a sound and positive “precedent” for a proposed national registry of Muslims in a press interview in November of 2016. This is particularly shocking, given that the mass incarceration of Japanese-Americans in concentration camps in the mid-20th century is widely known and cited precisely as an example of state-sponsored racial oppression.
President Ronald Reagan signed an act in 1988 that officially apologized for the internment camps and acknowledged that the policy was a result of racism and “war hysteria.” Yet the prospect of similar policies and practices re-emerging in the near future in the U.S. is quite real. The groundwork has already been laid, both through legislation expanding state impunity and reducing due process rights for U.S. citizens and residents, and through an increasing din of political and cultural discourses inflaming hatred and reinforcing lines of Otherness.

While there are undeniable differences between the mass detention of Japanese and Japanese-Americans and the contemporary regime of immigrant enforcement, there are also striking similarities. The continuity is the way these forms of oppression both depend on and reproduce white dominance and white supremacy in the U.S. Both of these systems involve the incarceration and residential exclusion of non-white people living in the territorial U.S. Both involve the production of an alarmist narrative, perpetuated through political speech as well as media discourse, that frame an entire racialized group as a “threat” to the
nation-state, the national territory, and the security of its native-born white citizens.

Given the 2017 partisan shift to the right, not to mention the ways that both anti-immigrant and other white nationalist sentiments and stories have moved closer to the mainstream of American public debate, it is a critical moment to revisit the history of racial oppression in the U.S. and ask what these phenomena, taken all together, reveal about the power and persistence of white supremacy in the United States.

**Suggested Further Reading**


*Top image: Pictures of people who were incarcerated at Manzanar War Relocation Center are displayed alongside family tags at Manzanar National Historic Site. Manzanar War Relocation Center was one of ten internment camps where Japanese American citizens and resident...*
Japanese aliens were incarcerated from 1942 to 1945 during World War II. Justin Sullivan/Getty Images

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