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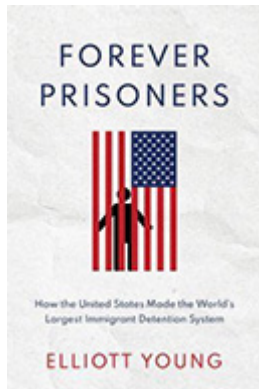
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FOREVER PRISONERS: HOW THE UNITED STATES MADE THE WORLD'S LARGEST IMMIGRATION DETENTION SYSTEM



Author: Elliot Young

Publisher: Oxford University Press, 2021. 280 pages

Reviewer: [Mary Holper](#) | November 2021

Elliot Young's new book, *Forever Prisoners: How the United States Made the World's Largest Immigration Detention System*, presents a new approach to a daunting topic. To tell the history of U.S. immigration detention is indeed difficult because, as Young identifies, it is hard to say which types of detentions "count" as immigration detentions. Did the Border Control's temporary camps for Mexicans in the Southwest during "Operation Wetback" count as immigration

detentions? What about detentions in insane asylums of foreign nationals deemed mentally ill? Or forced relocation camps for "enemy aliens" who were captured abroad? Indeed, as Young notes, the history of U.S. immigration detention also can include the enslavement of Native Americans and Africans on plantations and farms, which were "essentially prison work camps." He defines immigration detention broadly, and in doing so debunks the myth that the United States, with its symbolic shuttering of the Ellis Island detention facility in 1954, ushered in a new policy that disfavored immigration detention. He presents a counter-narrative, focusing on the many ways in which the U.S. government has caged foreigners throughout its history.

Young tells the history of U.S. immigration detention through narrative tales of people caught in the immigration detention dragnet throughout the history of the modern deportation system. He begins in the late 1800s, a period that saw expansive federal regulation of immigration, especially in efforts to exclude and deport Chinese nationals. Here he recounts the detentions of Chinese on McNeil Island prison, off the coast of Washington territory. He ends by detailing the detentions and deportations of one Salvadoran woman, a saga that began with a traffic stop in 2015 and spanned five years. Along the way, he tells the story of the World War I-era detentions of a stateless man declared insane, the detentions of Japanese Peruvians captured abroad and deemed "enemy aliens" during World War II, and the indefinite detentions of Mariel Cubans in the 1980s. By weaving together these narratives with facts and figures about various U.S. immigration detention policies, Young leaves the reader with little doubt that the U.S. detention system is enormous in size, and has negatively impacted millions of foreign nationals and their communities. He also successfully demonstrates how the U.S. immigration detention system is incredibly good at shape-shifting, taking on new forms, all the while maintaining its core feature of walling off those deemed "aliens" from the rest of the U.S. population.

In order to try to cover such a broad subject as the history of immigration detention, it is natural that there will be topics that are left out. The missing topic that I wish Young had taken up is e-carceration, commonly known as electronic monitoring. This is the immigration detention system's newest form of shape-shifting, where foreigners are walled off by virtual, not physical, walls. Yet, it imposes pain, shame, arbitrary rules, and limited freedom of movement, just as do physical walls. Empirical studies from the criminal justice system have shown that many people experience electronic monitoring as more punitive than physical incarceration. As Michelle Alexander has noted, electronic monitoring is to prison as Jim Crow laws are to slavery: at first glance, preferable, yet in practice, just as terrible. An inclusion of electronic monitoring would complete the "long and twisted chain" that Young describes — what started with slavery continues to this day, in the various permutations of immigration detention.

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