

Teaching Migration, Detention, Camp

How students learn about the refugee crisis

Reg Johanson

In *The Figure of the Migrant*, Thomas Nail asserts that “the twenty-first century will be the century of the migrant,” and the first years of the new century give ample evidence of this. From September to December 2015, events seemed to daily add themselves to the curriculum of the English course I was teaching on the literature, film, and visual art of migration, detention, and the camp, at Capilano University in North Vancouver BC, Coast Salish territory.

The Syrian refugee crisis was peaking in the news. At Capilano, we organized a week of events in September around the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s final report on the Canadian Indian residential school system.

A federal election was underway in Canada, as well as races for the Presidential nomination in the United States. In both countries, the response to the Syrian refugee crisis was a major election issue and in both countries many politicians responded by shamelessly deploying Islamophobic rhetoric.

There were the mass shootings at an Oregon college and a Planned Parenthood office in Colorado, the suicide bombings and mass shootings in Paris, and then the mass shooting in San Bernardino. The themes of my course were playing out in real time, yet class discussion dwindled as the semester went on. Students had a lot of material to help them understand what was happening, but not much to say about it.

The course has three theoretical orientations: decolonization, border imperialism, and the camp. From Giorgio Agamben, the influential Italian philosopher who has theorized the ways that law and state function to include and exclude, I take the theory of the camp as a site for the containment of bodies that have become bare life.

For Agamben, the camp is the physical, spatial location of those bodies which have been expelled by the nation-state from any category that would guarantee them any protection under civil or international law. The camp is where these excluded bodies are contained. Agamben gives the following examples:

“The stadium in Bari into which the Italian police in 1991 provisionally herded all illegal Albanian immigrants before sending them back to their country, the winter cycle-racing track in which the [French] Vichy authorities gathered the Jews before consigning them to the Germans, the *konzentrationslager fur auslander* in Cottbus-Sielow in which the young Weimar government gathered Jewish refugees from the East [in the 1920s], or the zones d’attentes in French international airports in which foreigners asking for refugee status are detained, [are all camps]. In all these cases an apparently innocuous space [...] actually delimits a space in which the normal order is de-facto suspended and in which whether or not atrocities are committed depends not on law but on the civility and ethical sense of the police who temporarily act as sovereign.”

From Harsha Walia, an organizer with the anti-colonial migrant justice organization, No One Is Illegal Vancouver, I take the theory of border imperialism, a technique of power that transforms migrants, refugees, Indigenous people, and others who are deemed to be a threat to the nation into bare life. From Indigenous anarchist artist

Gord Hill, and Walia, I take a theory of decolonization as the re-centering of sovereignty in an Indigenous frame, which undermines the legitimacy of settler-colonial governments to impose regimes of border control.

Border imperialism racializes people in its construction of those who belong and those who are excluded—as Walia says, it creates a “racialized hierarchy of national and imperial identity, which anchors and shapes the understanding of citizenship and belonging within the nation-state as well as within the grid of global empire.” Stories about the experience and process of racialization are key components of the course.

Racialization is one of the ways bodies become citizens on the one hand, or bare life on the other, bodies to whom, in Agamben’s theory, anything can be done. Detention follows easily from the creation of “the Muslim” (or, historically, “the Japanese”), for example, who is imagined as being inherently dangerous. And, torture follows detention.

We took seriously Agamben’s statement that “the correct question to pose concerning the horrors committed in the camps is [...] not the hypocritical one of how crimes of such atrocity could be committed against human beings. It would be more honest and above all more useful to investigate carefully the juridical procedures and deployments of power by which human beings could be so completely deprived of their rights and prerogatives that no act committed against them could appear any longer as a crime.”

This was a primary reference for understanding the texts we looked at, especially the Indian Act (Canadian legislation that has governed Indigenous life from above since the mid-19th century) and the documentary films on torture and detention.

We began the course with a discussion of aspects of the Indian Act, an important document in the array of legislation that legitimizes and institutionalizes the dispossession of Indigenous people in Canada.

The history of residential schools was pertinent here. Institutions designed to separate Indigenous children from their families and communities in order to promote assimilation into Canadian culture, residential schools were in operation from the 1840s until 1996.

Attendance was compulsory from 1884 to 1948. The schools were camps in the sense that they were the “location of dislocation,” in Agamben’s phrase, in which Indigenous students were sexually, physically, emotionally, psychologically and spiritually abused.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada was mandated by the government in 2008 to investigate what happened in those institutions. In its final report, the Commission stated that they were a “central element” in Canada’s program of “cultural genocide” against Indigenous people. We followed this with Gord Hill’s 500 Years of Resistance comic book. Hill’s text documents the long history of Indigenous warfare against this attempted genocide.

Next was Harsha Walia’s *Undoing Border Imperialism*. In addition to the theory, her book includes poetry and prose from several authors about the experience of migration, borders, detention, racialization, precarious labor, and decolonizing struggles. These were elaborated by rally, a zine collecting poems and testimonials from detainees, and a web-based project called Never Home, both published by No One Is Illegal Vancouver.

We watched Alex Rivera’s dystopian sci-fi film “Sleep Dealer,” in this context, which links the exploitation of migrant labour in the maquiladoras in Tijuana with enclosures in rural areas. Richard Rodriguez’s Mexploitation revenge flick, “Machete,” was a supplemental text here. Both films imagine a revolutionary network recomposing itself against the displacements produced by neoliberal capital.

White supremacist nationalism is a crucial factor in legitimizing border imperialism and in dividing the bodies of bare life from the bodies of citizens. For a study of this, we watched Shane Meadows’s film “This is England,” set in the early 1980s during the flag-waving period of the British war in the Falklands/Malvinas, which dramatizes the racist/antiracist split among a group of young skinheads. Anne Marie Nakagawa’s National Film Board of Canada documentary, “Between: Living in the Hyphen,” helped us to understand mixed-race identities in the context of the white supremacist nation, as it contains a (somewhat muted) critique of Canadian multiculturalism as merely another technique for managing differences.

The last third of the course was devoted to texts that deal with the camp as it functions in the imperial wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Palestine. Joe Sacco’s book of comics journalism, *Palestine*, documents stories of the 1948 expulsion of Palestinians from what is now Israel and their displacement to the camps that grew up to contain them, the intifada of the early ‘90s, and the Israeli detention and torture regime.

Three documentary films from the mid-2000s—Michael Winterbottom and Mat Whitecross’s “The Road To Guantanamo,” Alex Gibney’s “Taxi To The Dark Side,,” and Errol Morris’s “Standard Operating Procedure”—detail “the juridical procedures and deployments of power” that made it possible to detain without charge and torture people at Baghram Air Force Base, Guantanamo Bay, and Abu Ghraib.

Though the course featured several texts celebrating resistance, rebellion, and desire, it began and ended with abjection, with the victimization of Indigenous children in residential schools and of the detainees swept up by the wars in the Middle East. In the bourgeois-liberal-nationalist context in which I work, images of suffering, of victims, are received as opportunities for expressions of charity, guilt, and at best, indignation at injustice and demands for reform.

Representations of agency, of people taking up arms against oppression, of becoming outlaws and insurrectionists, are regarded with suspicion and discomfort.

And, for students who are racialized migrants themselves, the Canadian ideology of multiculturalism puts pressure on them to express gratitude to the nation and to distance them selves from migrants deemed illegitimate, especially in the presence of classmates who take their own legitimacy as citizens for granted.

The texts challenged all of this and maybe for that reason foreclosed on rote responses. They seemed to produce a silence which, though disconcerting for me as a teacher, might actually be a sign of a kind of success.

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