

SOCIOLOGY OF IMMIGRATION – SOCI 125

University of California – San Diego
Spring 2026



Figure 1: Woven Chronicles by Reena Saini Kallat

Mon, Wed, Fri, 11:00-11:50am
Coalition 127

Prof. Jake Watson
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Office Hours: Mon, 1:10pm-2:30pm
Social Science Building, Room 493 (or Zoom by request)
Feel free to attend as individuals or in groups

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COURSE DESCRIPTION

Migration is one of the most contentious issues of our time, often surrounded by competing claims that shape public opinion and policy: “immigration policies should let in real refugees and block the undeserving;” “immigrants take jobs and fail to assimilate;” or “immigrants should get in line and do it the right way.” In this course, we critically examine these and other prominent claims, analyzing their assumptions and evidence. Organized around these debates, the course explores core themes in the sociology of migration: theories of migration and mobility; processes of incorporation, assimilation, and othering; the construction of borders, citizenship, and legality; and the global and domestic politics of migration governance. Drawing primarily on case studies from the United States,

we will also examine how policies shape migrant experiences, how migrants in turn resist and reshape these policies, and how race and racism remain central to the politics and outcomes of migration. The aim of this course is not to arrive at firm conclusions or definitively (dis)prove claims. Rather, I hope that you will leave the course with the tools to critically assess prominent narratives around migration, understand the complexities of global human mobility, and situate your own immigration experiences and histories in a broader context.

READINGS

There are no required texts for this course. All readings will be made available as PDFs on Canvas or through the library. Please familiarize yourself with UCSD's physical holdings and online catalogue system. Please also sign up for free *New York Times* access. You are encouraged to acquire hard copies, but given contemporary custom, all materials assigned are available online. You may be interested in this [discussion between Ezra Klein and Maryanne Wolf](#) about reading as you make decisions throughout college about hard vs. digital texts.

COURSE STRUCTURE

We have ten weeks of classes this quarter followed by a finals week. The course will be organized around a “migration claims” framework. Each week, we will assess a prominent claim around migration, with a focus on the politics of the United States. Claims will be organized thematically around core topics of migration theory, focused on the drivers, regulation, and outcomes of human migration. Throughout, we will incorporate the perspectives and experiences of those navigating policies, politics, and local contexts in their everyday lives. Each week is organized into three sessions. The first two will generally introduce a core concept or area of social scientific research, while the third will extend on these foundations through engagement with a case study, alternative perspective, or activity. Lectures will include important material not in the readings that will be covered in assessments. When possible, slides will be uploaded before each class. Materials are listed on the day they are to be completed *before* coming to class, and they should be done in the order that they appear on the syllabus.



Figure 2: *Temporary Storage: The Belongings*, by Camilo Ontiveros

GRADING AND COURSE REQUIREMENTS

At the end of this course, you will receive a numerical grade out of one hundred that refers to the letter grades below. Your grade will be rounded to the closest whole number. For example, if you finish with 93.4, you will be rounded to 93 (A-). If you finish with 93.5, you will be rounded to 94 (A). An A+ is reserved for exceptional performance. For those taking the course for P/NP, a passing grade is considered a C- or higher as per UCSD [grading guidelines](#).

A	94+
A-	90 - 93.9
B+	86 - 89.9
B	82 - 85.9
B-	78 - 81.9
C+	74 - 77.9
C	70 - 73.9
C-	66 - 69.9
D	60 - 65.9

Your final grade will be assessed on the following components:

5% Your Migration Story – Sunday April 19th by 11:59pm

Please submit a one-page essay describing your migration story by the end of Week 3. Your essay should cover the following questions: When and where did you/your family migrate from and to? What were the reasons for migration (economic, political, social)? What happened to you/them once they arrived? How have you/they settled in the United States? Feel free to reflect on difficulties you had answering these questions (e.g., multiple migration trajectories or lack of knowledge due to historical distance). This assignment will be the first entry in your migration journal (see below). It will be graded on a pass/fail basis.

25% Migration Claims Journal

You will complete five “journal entries” across the quarter that respond to a week’s main claim (listed below). For example, the claim for Week 2 is “Everybody from poorer countries wants to migrate to the U.S.” Your journal entry should draw from course material to critically evaluate the claim. Every entry should draw explicitly from and reference *at least* one reading and one topic covered in lecture. Each entry should also offer your own critical analysis and reflection on the week’s claim and the material we looked at in class to address it. Be specific and make sure to include page numbers when citing particular arguments or pieces of evidence from readings. Entries should be between 350-500 words in length. For your reference, this paragraph is 128 words.

Journal entries should be submitted after the final session of the week and before midnight on the following Monday. For example, the entry for Week 2 should be submitted between 11:50am on April 10th and 11:59pm on April 13th. Completed entries will be graded on a fail (1), check (2.5), check-plus (5) basis, with grader discretion to provide a numeric grade that falls between these points. Full marks will go to entries that move beyond restating class material to offer their own critical assessments of claims and evidence. This can include application to contemporary immigration dynamics and politics. Everybody can receive full marks for each entry. To upload for review, go to the assignments page on Canvas and look for the respective week. Entries can be submitted every week except for Week 1 & Week 6

(midterm). This means you have eight opportunities to write five entries. Your lowest three grades will be dropped at the end of the quarter to account for the three weeks you can miss.

25% Midterm – In-Class on Friday, May 8th

The midterm will cover course materials and lectures up to and including May 6. There will be three question formats: multichoice, true/false, and short answer. More information will be provided closer to the time.

20% Migration Claim Op-Ed – Saturday, June 6 (end of Week 10)

An objective of this course is to equip you with the skills and knowledge to understand and engage in public debate around migration. In this final assignment, I prompt you to use what you've learned to join this debate by writing an Op-Ed. Choose a claim covered in the course (or select a new one in consultation with me or our TA) and write an evidence-based argument about it. Your Op-Ed should muster as much *credible* evidence as possible to make a convincing argument about a prominent aspect of contemporary migration to a public audience. This will require some additional desk research. You may draw on your journal entries for materials or ideas. I strongly encourage you to speak with your instructor and/or TA about your Op-Ed idea. For instructions on writing Op-Eds, see [this website](#). For examples, see the Opinion section of any major online newspaper, such as the [New York Times](#). A more detailed assignment prompt and rubric will be provided closer to the time on Canvas.

25% Final – Friday, June 12th 11:30am-2:29pm (Location COA 127)

The final will cover all course materials and lectures. I will provide you four essay prompts and ask you to select and reply to two. These will be more analytic essays, examining your comprehension and application of course concepts and ideas. You can bring a two-sided, letter-head sized cheat sheet to the exam.

EXTRA CREDIT OPPORTUNITIES

You may complete a maximum of two bonus credit assignments over the course of the quarter, equaling an additional 2% on your overall grade – enough to move a grade boundary. To take advantage of this opportunity, you will attend a migration-related talk or event on or off campus and write a one-page reflection memo about it drawing on concepts and material from class. Memos must be submitted to Canvas no later than 3 days after the event. They will be graded on a fail (0), check (0.5%), check-plus (1%) basis for a maximum of one percent of your total grade. This will be applied to your record at the end of the quarter. I will periodically post relevant events, but any event at the [Center for Comparative Immigration Studies](#) would work. If you see something interesting, feel free to reach out and check its eligibility. At all events, please be respectful of the speaker and audience.

TIME BANK

Every student is given a 24-hour time bank for the quarter to submit graded assignments after the deadline. You can choose how to use your time bank – if at all. It is your responsibility to keep track of how much time you have used. Canvas tracks lateness, so you do not need to inform me independently if you use your time bank.

LATENESS POLICY

Late assignments beyond the time bank will be penalized by three points for every 24-hours late. I am happy to discuss extensions when appropriate, but please reach out to arrange these *before* deadlines pass. In the interests of fairness and accountability, retroactive extensions will not be granted except under exceptional circumstances.

ATTENDANCE POLICY

Attendance is strongly encouraged but not required for this course. We will have a lot of time in class to discuss and debate ideas. This is one of the best ways to not just memorize but internalize ideas and develop a critical understanding of them. Topics and concepts not covered in readings will also be presented and covered in class.

WRITING SUPPORT

Professional and academic writing is a skill that requires practice and training. I encourage you to take advantage of the wonderful writing support resources offered on campus. UCSD's [Writing Hub](#), for example, offers free one-on-one consultation on papers and assignments.

STATEMENT ON USAGE OF GENERATIVE AI

Generative AI tools such as Chat-GPT are transforming higher education. My view is that GenAI can short-circuit important stages of the learning process to detrimental effects. Across the sciences and humanities, the *process* of our learning (i.e., critical reading, thinking, and communication skills) is at least as important as the information we are learning and creating. We can use GenAI to get at the latter, but often at the expense of the former. It is through grappling with concepts and ideas, assessing their relative value, debating them with our peers, and formulating our own thoughts in relation to them through research, writing, and speaking that we develop the habits of mind critical for active participation in democratic societies. At the same time, I recognize that GenAI can be a valuable tool and that many of you will enter careers after college where you will interface with it frequently. Given this, it is important to learn how to use these tools in intentional, reflective, and transparent ways. As such, I permit the use of GenAI in this course with important considerations and stipulations:

1. AI should not be used as a substitute for reading course materials. Read all assigned materials yourself, take your own notes, and engage critically with the content before (if ever) turning to AI for supplementary explanation.

2. You may not use AI tools to generate, write, or substantially revise your written assignments. The ideas, analysis, and writing must be your own. Submitting AI-generated text as your own violates UCSD's academic integrity policy.
3. You may use AI tools for brainstorming topics or initial ideas (which you then develop independently); checking spelling and grammar after you've written your draft; explaining unfamiliar terms or concepts to supplement course readings.
4. You're permitted to use AI to help you prepare for exams, such as creating practice quizzes, explaining concepts back to the AI to test your understanding, or generating flashcards.

Why this policy? The goal of this course is to develop your sociological imagination, i.e., your ability to think critically about social patterns and structures. AI cannot develop this capacity for you. Using AI to complete your work shortcuts your learning and prevents you from achieving the course's learning objectives. If you're unsure, ask me or your TA before using any AI tool for coursework. When in doubt, don't use it without checking first.

ACCOMMODATIONS

Life happens. If you find yourself in a difficult situation such as the loss of a family member, grave illness, or a mental health crisis, please let me know. I might be able to accommodate your specific circumstances and/or direct you to appropriate campus resources.

Note that in the case of sexual assault, I am obligated to report the incident to our Title IX Coordinator who is responsible for overseeing investigations of sexual misconduct. For confidential support, please contact The Office for the Prevention of Harassment & Discrimination directly: ophd@ucsd.edu.



Figure 3: *La Talaverita, Sunday Morning NY Times, by Aliza Misenbaum*

WEEK 1: Introduction

03/30 – Course Overview

04/01 – **NO CLASS** – The Globalization of Migration: are we more migratory today?

- Watch short lecture posted to Canvas on global migration patterns.

04/03 – Migration & Social Transformation: in what ways is migration viewed as a “problem”? How can sociologists reproduce this framing?

- Castles, S. (2010). Understanding Global Migration: A Social Transformation Perspective. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 36(10), 1565-1586.

WEEK 2: “Everybody from poorer countries wants to migrate to the U.S.”

04/06 – Debating Push/Pull Models: Why do people migrate?

- Doug Massey. 1999. Why Does Immigration Occur? A Theoretical Synthesis. In; *The Handbook of International Migration: The American Experience*, pp. 34-52

04/08 – Beyond Push/Pull Models of Migration: what role does history, structures, and connections have in shaping migration?

- Amitav Chomsky, Myth 14 & Case Study: Philippines

04/10 – Immobility: Why do so many people stay? What does this suggest about the “mobility bias” in migration studies?

- Schewel, K. (2021). Staying Put: Why it’s Time to Pay More Attention to Mixed Immobility. *Mixed Migration Review*, special report series
- **Recommended:** Farbotko, C. & McMichael C. (2019). Voluntary Immobility and Existential Security in a Changing Climate in the Pacific. *Asia Pacific Viewpoint*, 60(2): 148-162

WEEK 3: “States have a right to exclude migrants from their territory.”

04/13 – Borders & Sovereignty: When and why did states begin to regulate human movement across national borders?

- Torpey, J. (1998). Coming and Going: On the State Monopolization of the Legitimate “Means of Movement”. *Sociological Theory*, 16(3), 239-259.

04/15 – Borders, Laws, Race: How do racial hierarchies shape immigration law?

- Ngai, M. (1999). The Architecture of Race in American Immigration Law. *The Journal of American History*, 86(1), 67–92.

04/17 – Political Strangers: how does the notion of the “stranger” figure in modern border regimes? When might immigrants not be strangers? Why might this matter?

- E. Tendayi Achiume. (2019). “[The Postcolonial Case for Rethinking Borders.](#)” *Dissent Magazine* (2 pgs.) (Op-Ed Example)

WEEK 4: “Migration is out of control.”

04/20 – Constructing Threat: Why do we perceive certain forms of migration as threatening? What does it mean to say that migration is “out of control”?

- Leo Chavez. (2008). “Chapter 1: The Latino Threat Narrative” In; *The Latino Threat Narrative: Constructing Immigrants, Citizens, and the Nation*. Stanford University Press

04/22 – Why Policies Fail: What is “prevention through deterrence”? Why – according to De Leon – did it fail? What are its costs?

- Jason De Leon. 2015. *The Land of Open Graves*, Chapters 1 “Prevention Through Deterrence” & Chapter 4 “Memo & Lecho.”

04/24 – Manufacturing Crisis: How can migration crises be created and leveraged? What’s the history of such acts? What are their effects?

- Muzaffar Chishti and Julia Gelatt. 2022. [Busing and Flights of Migrants by GOP Governors.](#) *Migration Policy Institute*.
- Jesús Flores. 2023. [Bussing as a Political Pawn:](#) The Reverse Freedom Rides. *South Side Weekly*.

WEEK 5: “Our immigration system is fair & just.”

04/27 – Legal Violence: What is “legal violence”? How does it impact immigrants?

- Menjivar, Cecilia & Leisy Abrego. (2012). Legal Violence: Immigration Law and the Lives of Central American Immigrants. *American Journal of Sociology* 117(5): 1295-1564

04/29 – Spillover Effects: In what ways do immigration policies – and especially deportation – impact families and communities? Is this fair?

- Abigail Andrews, Fátima Khayar-Cámara. (2022). Forced Out of Fatherhood: How Men Strive to Parent Post-Deportation. *Social Problems*, 69(3): 699–716

- Watch: [“Through the Wall: A Family Divided by the US-Mexico Border.”](#) *The Guardian* (6m)
- **Recommended:** Canizales, S. L. (2023). Caught in the Dragnet: How Punitive Immigration Laws Harm Immigrant Community Helpers. *Contexts*, 22(1), 38-43

05/01 – Getting in Line: Do all immigrants have an equal ability to enter the United States legally?

- Immigration Policy Center. 2009. [DeRomanticizing Our Immigrant Past: Why Claiming “My Family Came Legally” is Often a Myth.](#)
- David Bier. 2021. [“Why Don’t They Just Get in Line? Barriers to Legal Immigration,”](#) Testimony to Congress, April 28, 2021
- Listen: [How the Other Side Leaves.](#) *This American Life*, March 2022 (18 mins)

WEEK 6: Learning to be “Illegal” & Midterm

05/04 – Coming of Age: How does illegality shape the coming-of-age process?

- Gonzales, Roberto. (2011). Learning to be Illegal: Undocumented Youth and Shifting Legal Contexts in the Transition to Adulthood *American Sociological Review*, 76(4): 602-619

05/06 – Why do some young people decide to contest the law despite the risks?

- Nicholls, W. J., & Fiorito, T. (2015). Dreamers Unbound: Immigrant Youth Mobilizing. *New Labor Forum*, 24(1), 86-92
- Watch: The Unafraid (available through the library)

05/08 – In-Class Midterm

WEEK 7: “Our immigration system lets in and supports real refugees.”

05/11 – Architectures of Repulsion: Who are “refugees”? Do our laws allow them to find security and safety?

- FitzGerald, D. S. (2020). Remote Control of Migration. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 46(1), 4-22.

05/13 – Resettlement: What is refugee resettlement? How are refugees treated once they are admitted to the United States?

- Heba Gowayed. (2020). “Chapter 3: American Self-Sufficiency” In; *Refuge: How the State Shapes Human Potential.*

05/15 – Seeking Refuge: What does it take to gain asylum? What does it mean to be a refugee?

- Watch: [The Swimmers](#), Netflix

WEEK 8: “Immigrants take jobs and drain the economy.”

05/18 – Immigrants & the Economy: Why are immigrant workers often cheaper than citizen workers?

- Lowenstein, Roger. 2006. “The Immigration Equation” in *The New York Times Magazine*
- Chomsky, Myth 1 – Immigrants Take American Jobs

05/20 – Global Restructuring of Social Reproduction: Why is immigrant labor cheap?

- Miraftab, Faranak. (2011). Faraway Intimate Development: Global Restructuring of Social Reproduction. *Journal of Planning Education and Research* 31(4): 392-405

05/22 – The Case of the H1-B Vias: How does the law shape the economic value of immigrant labor to employers?

- Ron Hira & Daniel Costa. (2021). [New evidence of widespread wage theft in the H-1B visa program: Corporate document reveals how tech firms ignore the law and systematically rob migrant workers](#). *Economic Policy Institute*, Washington D.C.
NOTE: Only read pages 1-7
- Banerjee, P., & Rincón, L. (2019). Trouble in Tech Paradise. *Contexts*, 18(2), 24-29

WEEK 9: “Immigrants Don’t Assimilate.”

05/25 – NO CLASS – Memorial Day

05/27 – Assimilation & Integration: How are the second-generation faring in America?

- Min Zhou & Roberto Gonzales. (2019). Divergent Destinies: Children of Immigrants Growing Up in the United States. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 45: 383–99

05/29 – Belonging: Why doesn’t “success” automatically lead to security?

- Shams, T. (2020). Successful yet Precarious: South Asian Muslim Americans, Islamophobia, and the Model Minority Myth. *Sociological Perspectives*, 63(4), 653-669.

WEEK 10: “People naturally don’t like others not like them”

06/01 – Contact & Threat: What factors shape how citizens perceive and respond to immigrants?

- Marco Giesselmann, David Brady, and Tabea Naujoks. (2024). The Increase in Refugees to Germany and Exclusionary Beliefs and Behaviors. *American Journal of Sociology*. 130:3: 725-763. **NOTE:** Skim “Data and Methods” & “Results,” but make sure to read the “Discussion” section.

06/03 – Sanctuary Movements: What is “sanctuary”? What does its history in the United States suggest about possible relationships between immigrants and citizens?

- Paik, A. N. (2017). Abolitionist futures and the US sanctuary movement. *Race & Class*, 59(2), 3-25.
- *Recommended Listen:* [Deportation Nation](#) w/ Chris Newman, *The Dig*, February 9th, 2025 (2h15)

06/05 – Op-Ed Workshop & Course Conclusion

- Come prepared with a 1-2 paragraph description of your op-ed idea to workshop with peers. We’ll also discuss op-ed writing.

===== END OF CLASSES, JUNE 6 =====

ACADEMIC CODE

Students are expected to exhibit the highest standards of academic integrity and never to submit work as their own which is the work of others – including AI models. Students should familiarize themselves with the UCSD’s Academic Integrity Policy: <https://senate.ucsd.edu/Operating-Procedures/Senate-Manual/Appendices/2>. Academic misconduct is the misrepresentation of one’s academic achievement and includes cheating on examinations, falsely indicating your own or another’s attendance in class, and plagiarizing written work. Failing to properly acknowledge and cite sources of information in a paper or presenting another person’s words or ideas as if they were your own constitutes plagiarism. All cases that violate UCSD’s rules on scholastic dishonesty are subject to disciplinary penalties, including but not limited to failure in the course.

A NOTE ABOUT CONTENT

This course may challenge each of our assumptions and raise questions that we have differing opinions on from one another. We will discuss sensitive topics with multiple personal and political dimensions, and diverse opinions and academic dispute are expected and welcome. You are expected to participate in all debates with respect for your classmates and instructor. Though personal opinions may differ, you will be graded only according to whether you learned the concepts taught in this course. I will

never grade based on your political opinions or conclusions – only whether you support your arguments and conclusions with good, social scientific reasoning and evidence.

Challenges to our basic assumptions can feel uncomfortable, and the possibility of feeling distressed is magnified when the topics being studied are so deeply connected to the ways we understand ourselves and/or when they concern core aspects of our identities. If you are concerned, feel free to talk with me during office hours. Counselors are always available to students at the university's Counselling Center. You can make appointments through [MyStudentChart](#) or by calling (858) 534-3755.

I look forward to a challenging and stimulating quarter!