

SYLLABUS

In Search of Refuge: Displacement, Borders, (Im)Mobilities

(Tentative weekly schedule for a 100-level General Education course, placing arts, humanities and social sciences perspectives into dialogue)

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A Note on Syllabus Development

This was initially developed during Penn State's *Redesigning Modernities* workshop in summer 2020, funded by a Penn State Strategic Planning Seed Grant

(<https://sites.psu.edu/redesigningmodernities1/>). In Fall 2021, Janet Neigh and Jutta Gsoels-Lorensen each offered a special topics version of the course at their respective campuses. It was taught at parallel times to facilitate digital collaborative work at key junctures described below.

No one leaves home unless home is the mouth of a shark.
Warsan Shire, "Conversations about Home"

Course Description

Why do we live in a world where so many people must flee their homes to survive? This course focuses on the rise in forced migration in response to violence, persecution, war, natural disasters, poverty, and environmental degradation from the late twentieth century onward. In the news media, the story of "the global refugee crisis" tends to be told through images of unprecedented disaster and spectacular havoc. To historicize displacement, students will consider the legacies that have led to violence and conflict, giving special consideration to European colonialism and the transatlantic slave trade. They will further learn about the impact of World War II, the Holocaust, and the Cold War on the emergence of the modern human rights architecture and on the legal definitions that remain relevant to this day.

To investigate this wide-ranging global topic, this course brings together frameworks and contributions from the social sciences and the humanities, inviting students to study the histories, experiences, and voices of those living in a world that moves. Students will engage with artistic representations of displacement through literature and film, in dialogue with migrant testimonies, archival material, international agreements, legal documents, and statistical data. Within an overall comparative approach, students are invited to consider regimes of (im)mobility from a number of global contexts. Key course readings will focus on contentious border sites such as constituted by the US and Mexico, Zimbabwe and South Africa, Australia within the Asia-Pacific region, along the internal and external boundaries of the European Union, and historically speaking, West Africa and the Americas.

Finally, to connect the international scope of this course to the local environment, the class will consider how forcible migration has reshaped communities in Pennsylvania, with a special focus on Erie—a refugee destination city. Students will have the opportunity to engage with local displacement stories, to learn from organizations that support refugee resettlement, and to discuss how the city has been transformed by migrants’ practices of place-making and belonging.

Course Objectives

Students who complete this course should be able to:

- Explain the historical forces shaping displacement in the twentieth century and why displacement is continuing to escalate in the twenty-first century.
- Identify the evolution of the post-war refugee system and its impact on international protection and global humanitarianism.
- Compare, assess, and integrate methodologies, disciplinary perspectives, and key concepts in humanities and social sciences scholarship on migration.
- Analyze fiction and non-fiction materials in a transnational framework attentive to the social and historical realities of displacement.

General Education Learning Objectives

- **Effective Communication:** The ability to exchange information and ideas in oral, written, and visual form in ways that allow for informed and persuasive discourse that builds trust and respect among those engaged in that exchange, and helps create environments where creative ideas and problem-solving flourish.
- **Integrative Thinking:** The ability to synthesize knowledge across multiple domains, modes of inquiry, historical periods, and perspectives, as well as the ability to identify linkages between existing knowledge and new information. Individuals who engage in integrative thinking are able to transfer knowledge within and beyond their current contexts.
- **Global Learning:** The intellectually disciplined abilities to analyze similarities and differences among cultures; evaluate natural, physical, social, cultural, historical, and economic legacies and hierarchies; and engage as community members and leaders who will continue to deal with the intricacies of an ever-changing world. Individuals should acquire the ability to analyze power; identify and critique interdependent global, regional, and local cultures and systems; and evaluate the implications for people’s lives.

Required Texts

- Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh et al., *The Oxford Handbook of Refugee and Forced Migration Studies* (2014) [available as an e-book through the PSU library]
- Mohsin Hamid, *Exit West* (2017)
- Viet Thanh Nguyen, *The Displaced: Refugee Writers on Refugee Lives* (2019)
- Art Spiegelman, *Maus II: A Survivor’s Tale* (1992)
- Warsan Shire, *teaching my mother how to give birth* (2011)
- Additional class readings will be posted on Canvas.

Films

- *Sleep Dealer* (Dir. Alex Rivera, 2008)
- *The Visitor* (Dir. Tom McCarthy, 2007)
- *Flee [Flugt]* (Dir. Jonas Poher Rasmussen. Written by Amin Nawabi and Jonas Poher Rasmussen, 2021)

TENTATIVE SCHEDULE

Unit 1:

Engaging Conceptual Grammars of Place, Home, and Belonging

In the initial unit of the course, we will examine some of the concepts, ideas, images, and genres that shape prevalent understandings of contemporary migrancy, in particular forced migration, and ask in what ways they respond, or fail to respond, to 21st century displacements. What concepts of “place” inform them, including theorizations, for example in social geography, that develop new critical vocabularies to grasp its experiential, affective nature?

Week 1

- [M] Introduction; Teju Cole, “Migrants Welcome”; Reena Saini Kallat, “Woven Chronicle;” UNHCR “Figures at a Glance;” and Department of Homeland statistics on refugee admissions
- [W] Tim Cresswell, *Place: An Introduction* and Viet Thanh Nguyen, Introduction to *The Displaced: Refugee Writers on Refugee Lives*.
- [F] Elena Fiddian- Qasmieh et al., Introduction to *The Oxford Handbook of Refugee and Forced Migration Studies*; Divya Victor, “Petitions (For An Alien Relative)” (poem); and Patricia Jabbeh Wesley “Erecting Stones” (poem)

Unit 2:

Responses to Mainstream Narratives about Migration in North America

This week’s unit asks about what narratives and normative ideas inform contemporary perceptions of migrancy and displacement in the U.S. How are they constructed, and in what ways are they deployed? Where do they come from, and what enables them? What does the ubiquitous description of the U.S. as a “nation of immigrants” entail? And what other forms of displacement are disavowed in the national or global (historiographic) narratives? Finally, how does the study of creative works in conjunction with legal and empirical research allow us to raise questions as to the legitimization of civil confinement and of the current expansion of the system? Also, what remains “unstudied” (Ryo), and why?

Week 2

- [M] Emma Lazarus, “The New Colossus”; Mary Antin, excerpts from *The Promised Land*
- [W] *The Visitor* (2007, Dir. Tom McCarthy; Emily Ryo, “Understanding Immigration Detention: Causes, Conditions, and Consequences,” *Annual Review of Law and Social Science*, vol.15, 2019, pp. 97 – 115.
- [F] Earl Lovelace, “Jobell and America”

Unit 3: Historical Foundations of Displacement in the Americas

This unit complicates the representation of contemporary displacement and migration as “unprecedented crises” by studying the foundational role of displacement in the colonization of the Americas. We will examine the displacement and eradication of indigenous peoples and the legacies of the Atlantic slave trade, paying special attention to the (im)possibility of writing from silenced, shattered, abandoned, or missing archives as well as how subsequent generations inherit the trauma of displacement. Finally, we will ask how these legacies are addressed in educational theory and practice, studying the participatory “photovoice” approach as a critical and creative response to displacement and place. This unit draws on materials from the OER module “Artistic Responses to the Zong Massacre (1781), which was created through the Redesigning Modernities workshop: <https://roam.libraries.psu.edu/node/1474>.

Week 3: Indigenous Displacement

- [M] Gary Snyder, “Now I’ll tell you what food we lived on then” (poem); and Janet Rogers, “Forever” (poem)
- [W] Gerald Vizenor, excerpt from *Manifest Manners*
- [F] Eve Tuck and Sefanit Habtom, “Unforgetting Place in Urban Education through Creative Participatory Visual Methods.” *Educational Theory*, vol. 69, no. 2 (2019), pp. 241 – 256.

Week 4: Atlantic Slave Trade

- [M] Florence Hall, testimony
- [W] Gregson v. Gilbert (1783); Fred D’Aguiar, excerpts from *Feeding the Ghosts*
- [F] Philip, excerpt from *Zong!*; Dionne Brand, excerpt from *A Map to the Door of No Return*; and [the SlaveVoyages database](#)

Unit 4: The Post WWII Refugee Crisis and the Invention of the Human Rights Regime:

This unit turns to World War II and the history of mass displacement in its aftermath. We will examine the international standards for refugee rights and resettlement developed in response, specifically *The Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees* from 1951, whose definitions remain foundational to this day. We will also study in what ways historical circumstances shape the concept of the “refugee,” paying close attention to race and gender. Departing from (international) protection as key category of governance and law, we will investigate various valences of the concept as reflective of different disciplinary and creative contexts, leading to development of our own definitions of “protection” whether framed in terms of rights, ethical conduct, city policy, personal reflection, creative work etc.

Week 5: Genocide and Displacement

- [M] Spiegelman, *Maus II* (Chapter 1); and Adam Jones, excerpt from *Genocide: A Comprehensive Introduction*
- [W] Spiegelman, *Maus II* (Chapters 2 and 3)

- [F] Spiegelman, *Maus II* (Chapter 4 and 5); and Gerard Daniel Cohen, excerpts from *In War's Wake: Europe's Displaced Persons in the Postwar Order*

Week 6: The Invention of the “Refugee” in Cold War Europe and its Afterlives

- [M] “The Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (1951);” and Walter Kalin, “Internal Displacement” in *Oxford Handbook of Refugee and Forced Migration Studies* (digitally linked class)
- [W] Reina Grande, “The Parent Who Stays;” and & Dina Nayeri, “The Ungrateful Refugee” in *The Displaced*; and Aleinikoff, T.A., “Rethinking the International Refugee Regime,” *The Yale Journal of International Law Online*, vol. 41, no. 14, 2016, pp. 1 – 14.
- [F] Zoom guest speaker who works in the legal field; interview: Aziza Ahmed and Deborah Anker. “Ask a Feminist: Gender and Asylum Law.” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, vol. 46, no.3, 2021, pp. 743 – 753. (digitally linked class)

Unit 5:

Reinterpreting Asylum and Displacement in the Twenty-First Century

From this point on, the course will focus on contemporary (re)interpretations of, and responses to, displacement and refuge, paying special attention to regimes of (im)mobility-- spatially imposed, intimately embodied, affectively foreclosed--as a key but underappreciated aspect of migration. Moving through the unit exploring tight constellations of creative expression and scholarly work from literary studies, ethnic studies, film studies, social and cultural geography, psychology, anthropology, political science, communication and technology studies, we will collaborate on developing a mini dictionary of displacement- and migration-related terms, updating outdated notions and/or devising novel ones where needed.

Week 7: Redefining Refuge in Contemporary Europe

- [M] Lev Golinkin, “Guests of the Holy Roman Empress Maria Theresa” and Maaza Mengiste, “This Is What the Journey Does” (both in: *The Displaced*)
- [W] “Feminist Refugee Epistemology: Reading Displacement in Vietnamese and Syrian Refugee Art.” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 2018, vol. 43, no.3, pp. 587 – 615. (Artists discussed in class will include Nisrine Boukhari, Trinh Mai, Foundland Collective, and Tiffany Chung)
- [F] Film *Flee [Flugt]* (Dir. Jonas Poher Rasmussen with Amin Nawabi [pseudonym] 2021) Vinh Nguyen “What is Refugee Cinema About?”

Week 8: Sexual Displacement & Intimate Mobilities

- [M] Guest Lecture [Ibis Sierra Audivert]: Andrew Gorman-Murray. “Intimate Mobilities: Emotional Embodiment and Queer Migration.” *Social and Cultural Geography*, vol.10, no. 4, 2009, pp. 441 – 460; [digitally linked classes]
- [W] Guest Lecture [Tembi Charles]: LeConté, J. Dill et al., “‘Son of the Soil...Daughters of the Land’: poetry writing as a strategy of citizen-making for lesbian, gay, and bisexual migrants and asylum seekers in Johannesburg.” *Agenda*, vol. 30, no. 1, 2016, pp. 85 – 95. [digitally linked classes]; Novuyo Rosa Tshuma, “New Lands, New Selves” *The Displaced*
- [F] Warsan Shire, selection of poems from *teaching my mother how to give birth*

Week 9: Spatializations of Power and Counter-Storying

[M] **Exam 1**

- [W] Behrouz Boochani, chapter 6 “The Wandering Kowlis Perform/The Barn Owls Watch” from *No Friend but the Mountains: Writing from Manus Prison*.
- [F] *The Island* (Dir. Gabrielle Brady with Poh Lin Lee); and Julia Morris, excerpt from *Asylum and Extraction in the Republic of Nauru*;

Week 10: Twenty-First Century Technologies and Forced Migration

- [M] Hamid, *Exit West* (Chap. 1-3, 1-57)
- [W] Hamid, *Exit West* (Chap. 4-5, 61-98)
- [F] Carleen Maitland, “Introduction” to *Digital Lifeline? ICTs for refugees and displaced persons*. MIT Press, 2018; and Koen Leurs, “Communication rights from the margins: Politicising young refugees’ smartphone pocket archives.” *International Communication Gazette*, vol.79, no.6-7, 2017, pp. 674 – 98.

Week 11: New Theories and Practices of Protection, Refuge, and Belonging

- [M] Hamid, *Exit West* (Chap. 6-7, 101-141); and Paulina Ochoa Espejo, “Introduction” from *On Borders: Territories, Legitimacy, & The Rights of Place*, Oxford UP, 2020.
- [W] Hamid, *Exit West* (Chap. 8-9, 145-189); Loren B. Landau, “Urban Refugees and IDPs” (*Oxford Handbook of Refugee and Forced Migration Studies*)
- [F] Hamid, *Exit West* (Chap. 10-11, 193-231); **Writing Assignment 1 Due**

Unit 6:

Resettlement and Place-Making in Pennsylvania

This unit considers how displacement is reshaping the culture and economies of Pennsylvania cities with a focus on Altoona, Erie, Pittsburgh, and Philadelphia. As a small rust belt city, Erie will be highlighted because it is an official U.S. government refugee resettlement area. It has supported persons fleeing violence and conflict from countries including Bhutan, Eritrea, Somalia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Syria, Iraq, Ukraine, Russia and, most recently, Afghanistan. In this unit, we will use the city as our heuristic, asking what definitions, assertions, and aspirations of the urban undergird narrative self-testimonies, in particular, in Erie, PA, while placing them in dialogue with recent scholarship in urban studies and city planning.

Week 12

- [M] Screening of Erie documentary *Rust Belt New Americans: A Film about the Refugee Experience* (Dir. Maitham Basha-Agha); and James Fallows, “Meanwhile in America: ‘New Americans’ in the Rust Belt” in *The Atlantic*, February 1, 2017.
- [W] Domenic Vitiello, excerpts from *The Sanctuary City: Immigrant, Refugee, and Receiving Communities in Postindustrial Philadelphia*
- [F] Guest speakers from a local cultural or resettlement organization

Unit 7: Climate Change and Displacement

In the final weeks of the semester, we adopt a different analytical lens, approaching displacement and migration through water and hydraulic politics, focusing on the multifarious ecological and existential webs of liquid border sites. Through an array of texts and films, we will ask how water challenges conventional frameworks of time, space, and self, requiring a shift from “crisis” to “nexus” We will specifically ask how creative work and scholarship frame their portrayals of water and hydraulic politics, paying special attention to forms of contestation and protest but also visions of sustainable habitancy.

Week 13: Climate Change Displacement and the Right to Water

- [M] The UN Refugee Agency’s *Strategic Framework for Climate Action*; Craig Santos Perez, excerpts from *Habitat Threshold*
- [W] *Sleep Dealer* (Dir. Alex Rivera, 2008)
- [F] Nikhil Anand, excerpts from *Hydraulic City: Water and the Infrastructures of Citizenship in Mumbai*

Week 14 – THANKSGIVING BREAK

Week 15: Case Study of Hurricane Maria and the Politics of Disaster

- [M] Lloréns, “US Media Depictions of Climate Migrants: The Recent Case of the Puerto Rican ‘Exodus’”; Ana Portnoy Brimmer, “Rhizomatic”
- [W] Robert Bullard, “Addressing Environmental Racism.” *Journal of International Affairs*, vol. 73, no.1, “Climate Disruption” (Fall 2019/Winter 2020), pp. 237 – 242;
- [F] **Exam 2**

Week 16

- [M] Discussion of the United Nations’ *Global Compact for Migration* (2018)
- [W] Student Roundtable Presentations (digitally linked classes)
- [F] Student Roundtable Presentations

Finals Week: Writing Assignment 2 Due