

NARRATING THE LIVES OF REFUGEES
AMST 454 ERM 388 FILM 454
Zareena Grewal & Jake Halpern
Mon 130-320 LC 105



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Course Description:

What are the costs of and alternatives to representing refugees as a societal burden and a source of political crisis? How does the discourse of crisis/burden reproduce one dimensional representations of refugees as victims in need of rescue, national subjects unfit for citizenship, and as a political and social threat? In response to the pervasive vilification of refugees in the US, some corrective framings of refugees still perpetuate troubling narratives in which refugees are either recuperated as super-heroes (Jesus was a refugee! Einstein was a refugee!) or pitiful, benign victims. In these narratives, some refugees, such as Syrians, are fetishized and hyper-visible in our political discourse while others remain invisible and politically marginalized, such as Central Americans. In addition, the moral language of hospitality and sanctuary often appeals to Americans advocating for welcoming refugees more than the legal language of human rights. This multi-disciplinary course in the emerging field of critical refugee studies draws on the debates, methods, and analytical tools of anthropology, journalism, ethnic studies, film studies, and American studies in order to critically analyze contemporary representations of refugee experiences across genres and to help students develop narrative strategies which represent refugees as agents and historical actors. Students will pay special attention to the processes by which war, colonialism, displacement, encampment, gender and racialization shape the lives of refugees in New Haven and beyond. We will also interrogate the relationship of religion in general, and Islam in particular, to state security projects in the US and globally.

Course Assignments

Over the semester, students will produce two oral history, journalistic, or ethnographic pieces of narrative writing which explore the ethical, social, legal and political challenges refugees face. Students will work collaboratively, either in teams and/or with the subjects of their work. The first oral history assignment (1,500 words, 30% of the grade) will be a collaboration with a New Haven-based theater company, Collective Consciousness Theater and IRIS (Integrated Refugee and Immigrant Services of New Haven). For the final mini-ethnography/journalistic project (2,500 words, 40% of the grade), which may be based on a fieldtrip over fall break (costs will be covered by a Luce grant) to the refugee camps in Greece, students will have the opportunity to work with journalists, anthropologists, filmmakers, and activists. Students may opt to do a creative documentary project (a film, podcast, graphic novella, photo-essay etc.) in lieu of a narrative written account on a subject of their choice as long as it is related to our course themes. Students will receive training in the digital humanities lab from our Digital Humanities fellow, Randa Tawil. Students will also develop familiarity with digital humanities tools for presenting their work (for example, <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/en/>). Students will also be responsible for a short digital review of a text of their choice from the syllabus (10% of the grade) and students will be asked to offer informal, ungraded responses to course materials on Canvas. Active student participation (20% of the grade) is critical to the success of our collective efforts; this includes regular attendance, preparation of reading materials (including carefully reading peers' drafts) before class, and respectful, attentive engagement in discussions.

Workshop Structure

After shopping period ends, we will break students into three groups of six (A, B, & C) led by an "editor" (Zareena, Jake, & Randa) and we will devote the last part of each seminar to workshopping student writing. Groups will switch for the second assignment so students have the experience of being edited by a different person. Our class meets each Monday; students who are presenting will be required to e-mail their work to the class by 5:30 PM on Friday preceding the actual class. Students will be penalized for submitting late. Don't miss your deadline.

All students will be asked to provide responses to the following two questions on Canvas and should bring a hard copy to class to give to the author:

- 1) What was the moment or passage in this article [film/podcast etc] that worked best or was most effective? Be very specific; provide just two to three sentences.
- 2) Suggest the single greatest improvement that could be made *and begin it*. Actually start writing the improvement, as if you were the author. This response should be 150-200 words.

Note: On the week that a student is presenting material to be workshopped, they are not required to submit written feedback to their fellow classmates.

Course Texts

This course will cover a diverse set of genres. Students will watch documentary films and shorts. Films for our course will either be screened publicly, in class, or a link will be provided for students to watch at home. Films are also available at the Film Study Center in the basement of WHC. Students will read fiction, memoirs, long-form essays, visual art, and ethnographies. Students are required to obtain four books (at the Yale Bookstore, also widely available in print and electronically). The remaining required readings will be available electronically on Canvas.

Required Texts:

Catherine Besteman *Making Refuge*

David Eggers *Zeitoun*

Viet Nguyen *Nothing Ever Dies* (not available on Orbis)

Wendy Pearleman *We Crossed a Bridge and It Trembled*

Elizabeth Strout *The Burgess Boys*

Optional texts:

Niklaus Steiner, Mark Gibney, and Gil Loescher, eds., *Problems of Protection: The UNHCR, Refugees, and Human Rights*

Robin Yassin-Kassab and Leila Al-Shami *Burning Country: Syrians in Revolution and War*

Course Schedule

Fri Sept 1

Films: *The Bridge Between Iraq and Connecticut?* *Cooking Yousur Al-Hlou*, *Strange Bedfellows*
Cynthia Farrar

Mon Sept 11

Jake Halpern “*Welcome to the New World*” Liisa Malkki “News and Culture: Transitory Phenomena and the Fieldwork Condition” Wendy Brown “Waning Sovereignty, Walled Democracy,” “Desiring Walls” Amitava Kumar “Flight”

Film: *9’11’01* short, Mira Nair (screened in class)

Thurs, Fri & Sat Sept 14-16

Religion, Gender, and the Politics of State Security Conference room 211 HGS 320 York

Mon Sept 18

Eggers *Zeitoun*

Film: *Resettled: New Haven’s Refugee Community* Sanoja Bhaumik

Wed Sept 20

YUAG Hafez reception Halpern “Artist’s Obsession with the Ruins of His Homeland” (optional)

Mon Sept 25

Strout *Burgess Boys*, Claudia Rankine & Beth Loffreda “On Whiteness and the Racial Imaginary: Where Writers Go Wrong in Imaging the Lives of Others” Brandon Stanton, HONY Refugee Series, Zareena Grewal, “Is HONY’s Refugee Series Public Anthropology?” IRC “What’s in my bag? What refugees bring when they run for their lives”

Films: *If London Were War-Torn Syria* *Save the Children*

Wed Sept 27

“Stories of a New America” Collective Consciousness Theater 7pm (field trip)

Mon Oct 2

Besteman “Introduction” & Part I, Nguyen “Just Memory” “On Remembering One’s Own” “On Remembering Others”

Film: *The Stray* Musa Syeed

Mon Oct 9

Besteman Part II and Part III

Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh and Aydan Greatrick “‘Traveling Fear’ in Global Context”

Film: *Tlaxcala Dreams* Sebastian Medina-Tayac (public screening Tues Oct 10 7pm)

Fri Oct 13 Collective Consciousness Theater Oral Histories Due

Mon 10/16

Wendy Pearlman *We Crossed a Bridge and It Trembled, This American Life* Alexander Freund, “Under Storytelling’s Spell? Oral History in a Neo-Liberal Age” “*Are We There Yet?*” “*Don’t Have to Live Like a Refugee*”

Fall recess (optional field trip: we will leave Monday night and return to New Haven Sun 10/22)

Mon Oct 23

Weyam Ghabbian “The War Followed Us Here” (handout to read in class)

Mon Oct 30

Ruth Behar “Death and Memory” Nguyen “On War Machines” “On Victims and Voices” Arthur Nazaryan “In Minnesota, a measles outbreak exposes the gaps in public health” Refugee-Solidarity in Death & Dying Photo Essay

Film: “Hold Your Breath” Maren Grainger-Monsen, *Paraiso* Nadav Kurtz

Mon Nov 6

Jake Halpern “The Underground Railroad: For Refugees At a safe house in Buffalo” “A Safe House for Refugees”

Film: “*My Enemy, My Brother*” Ann Shin

Mon Nov 13

Nicholas Schmidle “Ten Borders” Lauren Collins “Europe’s Child-Refugee Crisis” David Remnick “City of the Lost” *The Guardian* “Perilous Journey”

Mon Nov 23

Nguyen “On True War Stories” Kirk Johnson excerpt of *To be a Friend is Fatal*, “Taking Names”

Film: *The Prisoner, Or How I Planned to Kill Tony Blair* Michael Tucker

Mon Nov 30

Nguyen “On Powerful Memory” “Just Forgetting” Dina Temple Raston “He Was Caught Trying to Join ISIS, Now He’s in Jihadi Rehab”

Mon Dec 4

Wrap Up & **Reviews due (Final Projects due Dec 18)**