

# Seeking Asylum: History, Politics, & the Pursuit of Justice at the U.S.-Mexico Border

Fall 2022/BC3670

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This seminar explores the roots of and responses to the contemporary refugee “crisis” at the U.S.-Mexico border. We examine the migration of people, including families and unaccompanied minors, out of the so-called Northern Triangle of Central America (El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala), the history of U.S.-Central American relations, and the history and politics of the asylum system that those seeking refuge must negotiate in the U.S.

This is an engaged pedagogy course, meaning that the academic work we do will be conducted in conjunction with, and for the benefit of, an organization involved in social justice work. Specifically, our course is organized around a collaborative project with JiM (Justice in Motion), an organization that seeks to ensure the rights of migrant people through transnational collaborations in Central America.

We will be working with JiM on a storytelling project called Separated, which involves oral history interviews with migrant families who were separated at the border as part of the Trump administration’s “zero tolerance” policy in 2018. The project also includes interviews with *defensores*—human right defenders from Mexico and Central America who were tasked with finding these families, in cases in which parents were separated from their children and deported back to their home country while the children stayed in the U.S. Oral historian Fanny García and I have been working on this project for more than two years. We will be providing more information about the project in our pre-meeting and first classes.

Students will assist in the transcription, translation, tagging, summarizing, and other aspects of “processing” the interviews. We will also critically examine the enterprise of oral history, think about oral history as an applied activity, and explore what “storytelling” is, or should be, in the context of advocacy work.

## LEARNING OUTCOMES:

- To gain insight into the roots of contemporary patterns of Central American migration and learn about the history, law, and politics of asylum in the U.S.
- To think critically about the politics of oral history and storytelling
- To consider the potential of historical analysis to illuminate the origins of contemporary human rights violations and to suggest responses to them
- To gain a critical perspective on the media coverage and political rhetoric (of distinct ideological positions) surrounding asylum seekers
- To contribute to migrant rights advocacy by assisting the storytelling project
- To gain experience with collaborative forms of learning and doing
- To appreciate the “practical” applications of skills associated with a liberal arts education, including research, writing, and critical analysis, to create social change

The course fulfills the following Foundations requirements: Thinking through Global Inquiry; Thinking with Historical Perspective.

## REQUIRED TEXTS:

Rigoberta Menchú, *I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala*. Edited by Elisabeth Burgos-Debray Translated by Ann Wright. Verso, 2010.  
[available via CLIO or for purchase at Bookculture, which has about five copies on hand]

-Other readings will be made available to you electronically and on Canvas. Course materials include scholarly materials and recent media coverage, including some podcasts.


## COURSE REQUIREMENTS AND EVALUATION:

Your grade for the course will be based on the following assignments, which will be weighted as indicated:

- Weekly Reading Responses/Class Discussion Participation: 20%
  - Oral History Project Work: 25%
  - Good Citizenship/Class Job/Responsiveness: 20%
  - Final Project/Paper: 25%
  - Final Reflection: 10%
- Weekly Reading Responses: you’ll write a brief (250 word) response to the week’s texts. Don’t summarize the readings. Instead, tell us what you think of them and how they relate to readings from prior weeks. Participation: this is a small class and we want to hear from everyone in discussion!
- Oral History Work: students will be working on the interviews that we are collecting as part of the storytelling project, participating in transcribing and perhaps

translating/summarizing and other tasks. I'll ask everyone to keep a log of these activities.

- Final Project/Paper: Details of the project are TBA. The project will involve a collaborative component, with groups of students working on different aspects of the issue. Students will produce some sort of written report, the form of which is TBA.
- Good Citizenship: Because this course involves work with each other and for our partner organization, it requires that everyone be engaged and responsive. Please respond to emails and other communications in a timely fashion. I understand life is complicated; if you have an issue during the semester that requires you to disengage for some reason, that's ok: just make sure to let me know. Communication is key.

Ghosting is my pet peeve! 

- The Final Reflection will invite you to do just that: reflect on some aspect of the course, whether its content or its form. It will be about five pages in length. With your permission, I'd like to post some of these reflections on our class website.

## CLASS JOBS:

There are a lot of moving parts in this class. Running it will be a collaborative exercise. Everyone will have a class job, to be assigned as needed. Some of these may include:

- Oral History Project Managers to coordinate the oral history work
- Slackmaster to set up and manage our class Slack (Slack has proven a useful way to communicate and organize tasks in this course)
- Possibly Website Managers to update the class website that will record our activities and findings
- Newshounds to track the latest news of interest to our research, through our dedicated Twitter account
- Other jobs as the need arises

## REQUIRED ACTIVITIES OUTSIDE OF CLASS TIME:

We will have three meetings with folks from Justice in Motion outside of class time. These meetings will happen within a window on three Tuesday evenings:

- Tuesday Sept 20/ 5-7 pm over zoom
- Tuesday October 18/ 5-7 over zoom
- Tuesday November 15/ 5-7 pm (format TBA)

The first two meetings on zoom will last one hour. The third may be in person, in which case it will last 1.5 hours. We will firm up exact times at the beginning of the semester.

It will likely be necessary to meet outside of class time, at least on a few occasions, so that Fanny García can help us get up and running. We are all busy; I will only convene activities outside class-time if absolutely necessary.

### COLLABORATORS:

We are extremely fortunate to learn from our collaboration with Justice in Motion, and oral historian Fanny García in particular. Please remember that it's a privilege to do this work; treat our collaborators with respect and appreciation.

Generally speaking, most course directives will come from me. There may be times Fanny gives you a task or discusses something you're working on with you. We will try to stay in good communication, but if you ever feel you're getting contradictory instructions, let us know! I will be in charge of all evaluation/grading in the course.

### COURSE FORMAT:

This class will be conducted remotely, and students do not need to be able to attend in person to be in the course. However, if there is interest in participating in an in-person component, assuming public health protocols at the college/city/state levels deem it safe, we will explore this possibility.

Course meetings will focus on discussion of assigned texts but will also reserve time to discuss and advance the oral history interviews we'll work on as a group. Attendance is mandatory. Please do not take this course if you anticipate attendance issues; it's critical that we use our limited time in class to form a working community and that you receive the necessary background and training for the interviewing.

### SECONDARY (OR VICARIOUS) TRAUMA:

In the oral history interviews, as well as in some course readings, we will be confronting stories of extreme violence and trauma (physical, psychological, sexual). Secondary trauma (trauma that one experiences through exposure to the trauma of another person) is a real phenomenon, and each of you will need to decide for yourself whether this is a potential challenge you feel you can confront. I encourage you to bring up any issues you are encountering—because chances are, if you are having a particular experience, other students are too. Also note that the Furman Counseling Center has been a great resource for some students.

### THE CLASS AS A WORK IN PROGRESS:

More than other classes, engaged pedagogy courses are a work in progress. Key parts of the course, like how to organize the truth and reconciliation research, will be determined a little later. As our work evolves, we may decide to reorient readings or assignments. As the oral

history project itself evolves, some activities on the syllabus may be eliminated for lack of time; other ideas may arise in their stead. I'm aware that people have very busy schedules, and we need to respect everyone's need for timely notice of any changes. Still, you should be prepared to embrace flexibility!

**\*\*A FINAL WORD ABOUT RESPONSIBILITY:**

This course demands a level of responsibility and commitment that is a bit different from normal classes. This is because we are responsible not only to each other, but to people outside our classroom—namely, JiM, and the narrators with whom they work and for whom they advocate. The work we'll be doing has an impact well beyond the classroom, and as such, the course demands a high degree of reliability and responsiveness from all participants. Before you sign on to this course, please think carefully about your commitments and priorities this semester. If you think you are unable to dedicate yourself fully to this course, you probably should not take it.

[HONOR CODE AND OTHER OFFICIAL BUSINESS FOLLOW ON LAST PAGE OF SYLLABUS]

# WEEKLY SCHEDULE OF READINGS

## I. The Issue and the Project

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### Week 1. Wednesday, Sept 7

#### **Bienvenid@s: The Class and our Project**

We will discuss course expectations, structure, and content; the scope and aims of the oral history project; and the nature of our work with JiM. Second, we'll listen to parts of an interview and briefly talk through it. Before class, please read:

- [“The Unreachables,”](#) Vice News video about the search for separated families
- Sam Levin, [“‘We Tortured Families’: The Lingering Damage of Trump’s Separation Policy.”](#) *The Guardian*, January 4, 2021.
- WRC, “Concept Note” for storytelling project [sent via email, posted on Canvas]
- García and Milanich, “Separated: An Oral History” [sent via email, posted on Canvas]

### Week 2. Wednesday, Sept 14

#### **Contemporary Central American Migration: Causes and Policy Responses**

Why have people left Central America in record numbers in recent years? Who are the people leaving? How have U.S. policies towards migrants and asylum-seekers changed in recent years? Through a series of journalistic, testimonial, policy, and opinion pieces, we explore this background. We also explore a set of meta-questions: how do these different pieces use migrant stories, and with what effect?

- Oscar Martínez, [《The Beast: Riding the Rails and Dodging Narcos on the Migrant Trail》](#). Translated by Daniela Maria Ugaz and John Washington. New York: Verso, 2014; Read chapter 1, “On the Road” [originally published as *Los migrantes que no importan*, 2010] [GOOGLE BOOKS]
- Steven Mayers and Jonathan Freedman, eds. [《Solito, Solita: Crossing Borders with Youth Refugees from Central America》](#). Chicago: Haymarket, 2019; Read the stories of Gabriel Méndez (p. 59) and Ismael Xol (p. 223) [EBOOK/CLIO]
- Abraham Lustgarten, [“The Great Climate Migration Has Begun.”](#) *The New York Times Magazine*, July 23, 2020.
- United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. [“Women on the Run: First-Hand Accounts of Refugees Fleeing El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Mexico.”](#) UNHCR, 2015; Read excerpt, pp. 1-13.
- [“What Migrants Are Fleeing,”](#) *The Daily* (NYT podcast), (26 minutes)
- Nara Milanich, [“No Way Home,”](#) *Dissent*, June 19, 2018.

## II. Oral History, Testimonio, Storytelling: Possibilities and Perils

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In this section of the course, we'll explore a variety of theories and practices of storytelling, including oral history, the Latin American genre of “testimonio,” and life history. We'll

also explore the politics of storytelling: how personal stories have been mobilized, for whom, and with what results.

### **Tuesday Sept 20/ 5-7 pm**

#### **Special JiM Talk (zoom)**

#### **Nan Schivone, Legal Director, on the family separation crisis**

*Nan will talk to us about JiM's work on the family separation crisis and what it has been like to find oneself in the center of a historical human rights crisis that attracted a media frenzy and global outrage.*

### **Week 3. Wednesday, Sept 21**

#### **Oral History: Politics, Theory, Method**

What is oral history? What makes it “different”? What is the relationship between oral history and journalism in the telling of crisis? In addition to this week’s readings, we’ll do a brief Oral History Bootcamp with oral historian Fanny García.

- Alessandro Portelli, “What Makes Oral History Different,” in *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991, 45-58. [CANVAS]
- Mark Cave, “What Remains: Reflections on Crisis Oral History,” Introduction to Mark Cave and Stephen M. Sloan, eds. *Listening on the Edge: Oral History in the Aftermath of Crisis*. Oxford University Press, 2014. [CANVAS]
- Eric Rodrigo Meringer, “Living Too in Murder City: Oral History as Alternative Perspective to the Drug War in Ciudad Juárez,” Chapter 8 in Cave and Sloan, eds. [CANVAS]

### **Week 4. Wednesday, Sept 28**

#### **Latin American Testimonio**

Rigoberta Menchú, *I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala*. Edited by Elisabeth Burgos-Debray. Translated by Ann Wright. Second Edition. London/New York: Verso, 2010. [originally published in Spanish as *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú y así me nació la conciencia*]

**Excerpts:** Intro, chapters 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 11 here: <http://wetipthebalance.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/Excerpts-from-Rigoberta-Menchu-Part-1.pdf>

Chapters 15 and 16 (starting p. 102) here:

<https://www.sweetstudy.com/sites/default/files/q1/01/10/rigobertamenchu.pdf>.

If you want to read the book in the original Spanish, you can find it here:

<https://joacamillopenna.files.wordpress.com/2015/03/burgos-rigoberta-menchu.pdf>

### **Week 5. Wednesday, Oct 5**

#### **Oral History, Life History, Testimonio**

- John Beverley, “The Margin at the Center: On ‘Testimonio’ (Testimonial Narrative).” *Modern Fiction Studies* 35, no. 1 (1989): 11–28.

- Sidney W. Mintz, “The Sensation of Moving, While Standing Still.” *American Ethnologist* 16, no. 4 (1989): 786–96.

### **Week 6. Wednesday, Oct 12**

#### **The Politics of Storytelling: Which Stories? For Whom?**

- Chimamanda Adichie, “[What Are the Dangers of a Single Story?](#)” NPR.org. (18 minutes)
- Institute for Integrated Transitions, “[Changing the Narrative: The Role of Communications in Transitional Justice.](#)”
- Sujatha Fernandes, *Curated Stories: The Uses and Misuses of Storytelling*. 1st edition. New York: Oxford University Press, 2017. Oxford University Press, 2014, chapters 1 and 2. [CANVAS]

### **III. Historical Perspectives on Central American Politics & Migrations**

Backyards, neighbors good and bad, “inevitable” revolutions... This section of the course briefly explores U.S. empire in Central America from the Monroe Doctrine to the Cold War, traces earlier cycles of Cold-War-era Central American migration, and asks how it has shaped US asylum law and practice.

#### **Tuesday Oct 18/ 5-7 pm**

##### **Special JiM Talk (zoom)**

**Nan Schivone, Legal Director, on immigration advocacy today**

*Nan will talk to us about the immigration law, activism, and advocacy landscape right now. What should undergraduates considering a career in immigration issues at this moment in the world be thinking about?*

### **Week 7. Wednesday, Oct 19**

#### **Backyard: U.S.-Central American Relations**

What is the “backyard,” and how are earlier representations of Central America in U.S. public discourse similar to those in the present? How do they differ?

- George Black, *The Good Neighbor: How the United States Wrote the History of Central America and the Caribbean* (Pantheon Books, 1988) (Intro, chapters 1-3, 4-6) [CANVAS]

### **Week 8. Wednesday, Oct 26**

#### **Central American migration: Earlier circuits**

How did Cold War geopolitics lead to the first waves of Central American migration? What is the relationship those earlier cycles and contemporary ones?



- María Cristina García, [\*Seeking Refuge: Central American Migration to Mexico, the United States, and Canada\*](#) (University of California Press, 2006) (introduction, chapter 1, 2, 3, conclusion) [EBOOK/CLIO]
- Leisy Abrego, “On Silences: Salvadoran Refugees Then and Now,” *Latino Studies* 15, no. 1/2 (2017), 73-85. [CANVAS]

### **Week 9. Wednesday, Nov 2**

#### **Law and geopolitics: How Central American migration shaped US asylum law**

US asylum law impacts Central American migrants in obvious ways, but in what ways has this migration indelibly shaped asylum law?

- Linda Rabben, *Sanctuary and Asylum: A Social and Political History* (University of Washington Press, 2016) (chapter 7) [CANVAS]
- Susan Bibler Coutin, “Falling Outside: Excavating the History of Central American Asylum Seekers,” *Law & Social Inquiry* 36, no. 3 (June 1, 2011): 569–96 [CANVAS]
- Hannah Arendt, “We Refugees,” 1943.

### **III. Seeking Justice: Thinking about Redress**

In the final section of the course, we move to a different set of historical questions, about the rise of “transitional justice”: processes of redress, reparations, and reconciliation for historical wrongs. We will read about a series of global examples with an eye to lessons that might help to inform efforts to secure justice for separated migrant families in the contemporary U.S.

*\*\*Please note readings may change in this last part of the course as our final project becomes clearer!*

### **Week 10. Wednesday, Nov 9**

#### **Terror and its aftermath: What is justice?**

What happens when the state’s ideas about what constitutes a crime, and what constitutes justice, differ from those of victims and their communities? These readings explore how such dynamics developed in Guatemala and lead us into the final section of the course, on “transitional justice.”

- Commission for Historical Clarification (CEH), “Guatemala: Memory of Silence.” Guatemala City: CEH, 1999: prologue, acknowledgements (skim), intro, and conclusions (pp 17-45).
- Hernández, Osvaldo. “[Beneath the shawls, justice is served.](#)” *Plaza Pública*. February 28, 2016 [originally published in Spanish as “[La justicia de los perrajes.](#)”]
- Sieder, Rachel. “Contested Sovereignties: Indigenous Law, Violence and State Effects in Postwar Guatemala.” *Critique of Anthropology* 31, no. 3 (September 1, 2011): 161–84.

**Tuesday Nov 15/ 5-7 pm**

**Special JiM Talk (format TBA)**

**Cathleen Caron, Founding Director, on JiM's work and mission**

*Farmworker advocate and human rights lawyer Cathleen Caron will talk about JiM's origins, how it differs from other migrant rights organizations, and its theory of social change.*

**Week 11. Wednesday, Nov 16**

- Commission for Historical Clarification (CEH), "Guatemala: Memory of Silence." Guatemala City: CEH, 1999: "Recommendations," pp. 47-67
- Jill Lepore, "[Let History, Not Partisans, Prosecute Trump.](#)" *Washington Post*. October 16, 2020.
- "[Ocasio-Cortez Wants '9/11-Style Commission' on Family Separations,](#)" *The Guardian*, July 20, 2019.

**No Class, Wednesday, Nov 23: Thanksgiving**

**Week 12. Wednesday, Nov 30**

- Introduction and chapter 1, J. Sköld and S. Swain. *Apologies and the Legacy of Abuse of Children in "Care": International Perspectives*. Springer, 2015.
- Sam Levin. "[We Tortured Families': The Lingering Damage of Trump's Separation Policy.](#)" *The Guardian*, January 4, 2021.
- Laura Weiss, Libby Watson, Hilary Beaumont, Alex Shephard, and Marcia Brown. "[The Government's Human Cruelty Will Outlive Trump.](#)" *The New Republic*, November 25, 2020.

**Week 13. Wednesday, Dec 7**

**Final class**

- TBA!

## **Barnard Business**

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### **Honor Code**

We, the students of Barnard College, resolve to uphold the honor of the College by engaging with integrity in all of our academic pursuits. We affirm that academic integrity is the honorable creation and presentation of our own work. We acknowledge that it is our responsibility to seek clarification of proper forms of collaboration and use of academic resources in all assignments or exams. We consider academic integrity to include the proper use and care for all print, electronic, or other academic resources. We will respect the rights of others to engage in pursuit of learning in order to uphold our commitment to honor. We pledge to do all that is in our power to create a spirit of honesty and honor for its own sake.

### **Statement on Wellness**

It is important for undergraduates to recognize and identify the different pressures, burdens, and stressors you may be facing, whether personal, emotional, physical, financial, mental, or academic. We as a community urge you to make yourself--your own health, sanity, and wellness--your priority throughout this term and your career here. Sleep, exercise, and eating well can all be a part of a healthy regimen to cope with stress. Resources exist to support you in several sectors of your life, and we encourage you to make use of them. Should you have any questions about navigating these resources, please visit these sites:

- <http://barnard.edu/primarycare>
- <http://barnard.edu/counseling>
- <http://barnard.edu/wellwoman/about>
- [Stressbusters Support Network <pdf>](#)

### **Statement on Disability Accommodations**

"If you are a student with a documented disability and require academic accommodations in this course, you must register with the Office of Disability Services (ODS) for assistance. Students requesting accommodations will need to first meet with an ODS staff member. Once registered, students are required to request accommodation letters each semester to notify faculty. Accommodations are not retroactive, so it is best to contact ODS early each semester to access your accommodations. If you are registered with ODS, please see me to schedule a meeting outside of class in which you can bring me your faculty notification letter and we can discuss your accommodations for this course. Students are not eligible to use their accommodations in this course until they have met with me. ODS is located in Milbank Hall, Room 009/008."

### **Statement on Access to Affordable Textbooks**

"All students deserve to be able to access course texts. The high costs of textbooks and other course materials prohibit access and perpetuate inequity, and Barnard librarians are partnering with students, faculty, and staff to increase access. By the first day of advance registration for each term, you should be able to view on CourseWorks information provided by your faculty about required texts (including ISBN or author, title, publisher and copyright date) and their prices. Once you have selected your classes, here are some cost-free methods for accessing course texts, recommended by the Barnard Library: find out if your faculty has placed the texts on reserve at Barnard Library or another Columbia library, and look for course texts using CLIO (library catalog), Borrow Direct (request books from partner libraries), Interlibrary Loan (request book chapters from any library), and NYPL. Students with financial need or insecurity can check items out from the FLIP lending libraries in the Barnard Library and Butler Library and can consult with the Dean of Studies and the Financial Aid Office about additional affordable alternatives for getting access to course texts. Talk with your librarian and visit the Barnard Library Textbook Affordability guide ([library.barnard.edu/textbook-affordability](http://library.barnard.edu/textbook-affordability)) for more details."