

# ASIA AM 178: Critical Refugee Studies

Evyn Lê Espiritu Gandhi, PhD

**TIME:** Tuesdays and Thursdays 11:00-12:15pm

**PLACE:** Public Affairs 2270

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**OFFICE HOURS:** Thursdays 1:30-4:30pm in Rolfe 3327

This undergraduate lecture course introduces students to the field of critical refugee studies. Rather than depict the refugee as a victim of displacement or an object of sociological study, this course centers the refugee as a subject of knowledge production. We inquire what critical analyses of war, empire, militarism, and humanitarianism are made visible via a refugee epistemology. This course is transnational and intersectional in analysis. We begin by mapping the political and theoretical field of critical refugee studies, attending to the ways in which the refugee figure highlights the limits of the nation-state order to guarantee human rights. We will then focus on how particular refugee subjects—Vietnamese, Cambodian, Lao, Syrian, Iranian, Palestinian, Central American—negotiate their refugee status and stories via cultural production. During this course, we will identify what criticisms of state violence, imperial intervention, and humanitarian discourse a refugee epistemology makes possible, as well as inquire how the different formal qualities of each piece of literature or film dictate the shape and meaning of the refugee intervention.

## COURSE OBJECTIVES

By the end of this course, students will be able to:

- critically analyze how refugees are represented in government documents, political speeches, and popular media
- understand and articulate a critical refugee studies framework
- apply a critical refugee studies framework to other refugee populations not discussed in class
- explain why critical refugee studies is an important part of Asian American Studies

## STUDENT LEARNING OUTCOMES

Throughout this course, students will learn how to:

- identify the main argument in different disciplinary texts
- put different texts in conversation with one another
- discuss sensitive topics in a critical, generous, and productive manner
- engage in cultural critique and formal analysis
- research, draft, and record a podcast

## TEXTS

Please acquire the following books. All other readings can be found on CCLE.

- Ocean Vuong, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (New York: Penguin, 2019)
- Dina Nayeri, *The Ungrateful Refugee: What Immigrants Never Tell You* (New York: Catapult Books, 2019)
- Valeria Luiselli, *Tell Me How It Ends: An Essay in 40 Questions* (Minneapolis: Coffee House Press, 2017)

### **WEEK 1: Post-WII Production of Refugeehood**

**Jan 7:** In class: Introductory lecture, review syllabus

**Jan 9:** Hannah Arendt, “The Decline of the Nation-State and the End of the Rights of Man,” in *The Origins of Totalitarianism (1951)* (New York, Harcourt Inc: 1976), 267-302.

### **WEEK 2: Refugees as Bare Life?**

**Jan 14:** Hannah Arendt, “We Refugees,” in *Altogether Elsewhere: Writers on Exile*, ed. Marc Robinson (Boston: Faber and Faber, 1994), 110-119.

Giorgio Agamben, “We Refugees,” trans. Michael Rocke, *Symposium* 49, no. 2 (1995): 114-119.

**Jan 16:** Debarti Sanyal, “Calais’s ‘Jungle’: Refugees, Biopolitics, and the Arts of Resistance,” *Representations* 139 (Summer 2017): 1-33.

**Suggested:** Patricia Owens, “Reclaiming ‘Bare Life’?: Against Agamben on Refugees,” *International Relations* 23, no. 4 (2009): 567-582.

**Extra Credit: Jan 13:** Dr. Manu Karuka, “Empire’s Tracks,” 3:00-4:30pm in Young Research Library, Main Conference Room. Student workshop, 5:00-6:00pm in Rolfe 2125.

### **WEEK 3: Critical Refugee Studies: Space and Time**

**Jan 21:** Yén Lê Espiritu, “Critical Refuge(e) Studies” and “Militarized Refuge(es),” in *Body Counts: The Vietnam War and Militarized Refuge(es)* (Berkeley: UC Press, 2014), 1-48.

**Jan 23:** Vinh Nguyen, “Refugeetude: When Does a Refugee Stop Being a Refugee?,” *Social Text* 37, no. 2 (June 2019): 109-131.

**In class:** Brandon Soun and Karen Choup, “Formation and Destruction” Podcast, *Asian American Studies* 101, Fall 2018.

### **WEEK 4: Recap and Midterm Exam**

**Jan 28:** Self-Evident, “Hello, Freedom Man” Podcast, <https://selfevidentshow.com/episode-5>

**In class: Discuss podcast proposal. Review study guide.**

**Jan 30: In-class Midterm.**

**Extra Credit: Jan 31:** Conference on Central American Migration, 9:00am-5:00pm, Luskin School of Public Affairs Building, Room 2355

### **WEEK 5: Vietnamese Refugees and the Afterlives of War**

**Feb 4: At home:** Ocean Vuong, *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous* (New York: Penguin, 2019), Parts I and II: 1-160.

**In class: Guest lecture by Janet Chen on audio recording tips. Work on podcast proposal.**

**Feb 6: At home:** Ocean Vuong, *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous* (New York: Penguin, 2019), Part III: 161-244.

**Podcast proposal due. Discuss podcast research worksheet and paper.**

**WEEK 6: Surviving and Thriving: Rita Phetmixay on Healing out Lao'd**

**Feb 11:** Jael Vizcarra, "Humanitarian Disappointments: Labor Unrest and the Case of Laotian Refugees in Dirty War Argentina," *Amerasia Journal* 42, no. 2 (2016): 49-70.

**In Class:** Screen Rita Phetmixay, *Phetmixay Means Fighter* (2017).

**Feb 13:** Rita Phetmixay, "E0: Rita Phetmixay," *Healing Out Lao'd*

Rita Phetmixay, "E13: Ova Saopeng," *Healing Out Lao'd*

Ova Saopeng and Leilani Chang, "Clips from Refugee Nation," 2012.

**In Class:** Guest lecture by Rita Phetmixay.

**Extra credit: Feb 14:** Lamis Abdelaaty, "Discrimination and Delegation: Explaining State Responses to Refugees," 12:00-1:30pm, Bunche Hall, Room 10383

**WEEK 7: Feminist Refugee Epistemology and Militarized Archives**

**Feb 18:** Yên Lê Espiritu and Lan Duong, "Feminist Refugee Epistemology: Reading Displacement in Vietnamese and Syrian Refugee Art," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 43, no. 3 (Spring 2018): 587-615.

**In class:** Guest lecture by Lan Duong. Podcast research worksheet and paper due.

**Feb 20: At home:** Davorn Sisavath, "The US Secret War in Laos: Constructing an Archive from Military Waste," *Radical History Review* 133 (2019): 103-116.

**In class:** Guest lecture by Davorn Sisavath. Brunch served starting at 10:30am.

**WEEK 8: Palestinian Refugeehood and Vexed Solidarities under Settler Colonialism**

**Feb 25:** Edward Said, "Reflections on Exile," *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 137-149.

Lila Sharif, "Vanishing Palestine," *Critical Ethnic Studies* 2, no. 1 (Spring 2016): 17-39.

**Feb 27:** Evyn Lê Espiritu Gandhi, "Vexed Solidarities: Vietnamese Israelis and the Question of Palestine," *LIT: Literature Interpretation Theory* 29, no. 1 (2018): 8-28.

**Extra Credit: Feb 28:** Conference on Venezuela's Refugee Crisis, 12:00-3:00pm in Haines 352

**WEEK 9: Negotiating Refuge in the Wake of the Iranian Revolution**

**Mar 3: At home:** Dina Nayeri, *The Ungrateful Refugee: What Immigrants Never Tell You* (New York: Catapult Books, 2019), Parts One and Two: 1-180.

**Mar 5: At home:** Dina Nayeri, *The Ungrateful Refugee: What Immigrants Never Tell You* (New York: Catapult Books, 2019), Parts Three, Four, Five: 181-346.

**Script of podcast due.**

**Extra Credit: Mar 6:** Lucy Mayblin, 12:00-1:30pm, Bunche Hall, Room 10383

**WEEK 10: Central American Refugees and U.S. Empire**

**Mar 10: At home:** Valeria Luiselli, *Tell Me How It Ends: An Essay in 40 Questions* (Minneapolis: Coffee House Press, 2017), Introduction, Chapters I and II: 1-54.

**In class:** Screen Lan Nguyen, *Fighting for Family* (2019). Guest lecture by Lan Nguyen.

**Mar 12: At home:** Valeria Luiselli, *Tell Me How It Ends: An Essay in 40 Questions* (Minneapolis: Coffee House Press, 2017), Chapters III and IV, Coda: 55-106.

**Extra Credit: Mar 13:** David FitzGerald, “Refugee Beyond Reach: How Rich Democracies Repel Asylum Seekers,” 12-1:30pm, Bunche 10383

**FINAL: Wednesday, Mar 18: 3:00-6:00pm**  
Final Podcast due. Final Podcast Presentations.

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### **GRADE BREAKDOWN**

Participation: 15%

Midterm Exam: 25%

Final Podcast Project

    Proposal: 5%

    Podcast research worksheet and paper (4-5 pages): 15%

    Script of podcast: 15%

    Final Podcast Presentation: 10%

    Final Podcast: 15%

### **PARTICIPATION**

Lectures will be supplemented with in-class discussions. You are expected to come to class on time having read the assigned readings. Read the assigned readings generously but critically. What is the central argument of each text? Does the historical evidence support the argument? What are some potential limitations of the text? Please formulate discussion questions in preparation of class regarding material you either do not understand, or want to probe further. Unexcused absences will negatively impact your participation grade.

### **MIDTERM EXAM**

The midterm exam (Week 4) will consist of vocabulary definitions and short-essay questions that will cover key themes and topics discussed throughout the course.

### **FINAL PODCAST PROJECT**

Throughout the quarter, you will work in groups of 3-4 students to conduct research on a refugee topic not discussed in class. You can choose to either focus on a population not addressed during the course—such as Somali or Rohingya refugees—or provide another perspective on a population discussed during the course. The goal is to analyze your case study using a critical refugee studies framework.

## **GRADE CALCULATION**

A, 93 and above	C+, 77-79.99
A-, 90-92.99	C, 73-76.99
B+, 87-89.99	C-, 70-72.99
B, 83-86.99	D+, 67-69.99
B-, 80-82.99	D, 60-66.99
	F, 59.99 and below

## **LATE SUBMISSION POLICY**

All late submissions will be docked 10% for each day that they are late.

## **EXTRA CREDIT**

Several times throughout the semester there will be extra credit opportunities to attend events related to critical refugee studies on campus or in LA. Some of these events are listed on the syllabus. I will let you know of other eligible events as they come up. If you attend one of the approved events and would like to receive extra credit, please upload to the "Extra Credit" folder on CCLE a photo of yourself at the event plus a one-paragraph reflection. You may earn up to 3 extra credit points over the course of the quarter.