

English 302: Special Topics
In Search of Asylum: Latin American Refugees in the U.S. Literary Imagination

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Meeting time: M/W TBD
Office hours: M/W 1:00-2:30
and by appointment

Course Description

The figure of the refugee looms large in the American political landscape, even as the identities of refugees frequently remain confined to the shadows. U.S. Latinx writers have long engaged in efforts to bring the stories and lives of these would-be immigrants into the light, to give refugees literary asylum through fiction, nonfiction, poetry, film, and song. In this course, we will ask, what does it mean to seek refuge? In a literal sense? In a literary sense? Why and how should we tell these stories? And who has the right to tell them? Alongside questions of justice and injustice we will place questions of metaphor and materiality, thinking through the implications of the power of text, of documents, of ourselves and others to define and redefine one's identity. Our texts will complicate our understanding of what it means to be a border-crosser, an unaccompanied minor, and a deportee, as well as to be in search of or to offer sanctuary, freedom, and home. As part of this course we will also engage in service to the refugee community of Harrisonburg and Rockingham County, navigating storytelling techniques together and learning from one another using the Story Maps platform.

Course Goals:

1. Developing familiarity with the significant historical, political, and cultural events shaping definitions of a refugee, both literal and literary;
2. Engaging in careful close reading of and reflections on Latinx narratives of refugee experiences ranging from Cuba to Guatemala to El Salvador to Mexico, developing your skills as a critical thinker and writer;
3. Familiarizing yourself with current literary scholarship, joining the critical conversation surrounding Latinx literary work;
4. Formulating an understanding of the relationship between refugee identity and the experiences of movement, location, and dislocation by performing a literary mapping project that will connect the spaces and places of refugee lives with literary representations;
5. Serving refugee members of the Harrisonburg/Rockingham County community by helping them to produce similar mapping projects of their own.

A Note on the Course Content:

Given the range of strong feelings and attitudes toward the subject of asylum and refugee status that many have, the narratives we study will likely provoke spirited discussion from multiple points of view, which I welcome. Engaging with this material will require ground rules for discussion and participation, which we will set as a class in the first week of the semester. Many of these narratives will also depict traumatic experiences, including verbal, physical, and sexual assault among other difficult episodes and events. It is expected that you treat these matters with utmost seriousness and sensitivity both for the work and for your fellow classmates. I also encourage you to speak with me individually if you have any concerns about the course content.

Required Texts:

Julia Alvarez, *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents* (1991)
Carlos Eire, *Waiting for Snow in Havana: Confessions of a Cuban Boy* (2003)
Valeria Luiselli, *Tell Me How it Ends* (2017)
Demetria Martinez, *Mother Tongue* (1994)
Seth Michelson, editor, *Dreaming America: Voices of Undocumented Youth in Maximum-Security Detention* (2016)
Hector Tobar, *The Tattooed Soldier* (1998)

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Javier Zamora, *Unaccompanied* (2017)

Required Films:

Which Way Home (2009) *Crossing Over* (2013)

Course Work: Assignments and Grading

Participation 20%

In Class Writing 10%

Over the course of the semester you will be asked to reflect on the readings by responding to an occasional 5 minute in-class writing prompt. Questions may ask for a close reading of a passage, a personal reflection, or an engagement with a scholarly argument using the text as evidence. Be prepared to draw on specific textual examples as you write (in other words, always have your book with you). Writing prompts cannot be made up, but I will drop the lowest two scores.

General participation 10%

Active and attentive participation in the class includes careful listening, thoughtful and informed questions and responses to classmates, and demonstrated curiosity about the material. We will set ground rules together as a class for determining positive and negative examples of participation.

Note: Attendance is essential to participation. If you miss more than three classes, every absence thereafter will result in a deduction of 3 percentage points from your final grade. More than six missed classes will result in an automatic failure of the course.

Formal Writing 30%

Short Essay 1: Fiction vs. Nonfiction 15%

This short (4-6 page) essay will require you to reflect on the power of fiction vs. nonfiction in storytelling by and about refugees.

Short Essay 2: Who Speaks for the Refugee? 15%

This short (4-6 page) essay will require you to enter into a critical dialogue about the (in)ability of refugees to speak on their own behalf, drawing on 2-3 of our texts.

Final Project: Story Maps 50%

This semester-long project will require you to work collaboratively to document a refugee journey by collaborating with members of the Harrisonburg/Rockingham County community and using StoryMaps as our storytelling platform. The grading for the project will be broken down as follows:

- Preparatory work: 10%
- Effective collaboration with community member(s): 10%
- Execution of StoryMap: 20%
- End of semester reflection essay: 10%

Class Writing

Work in progress

I very much look forward to seeing and helping you with your works in progress, but I will not comment on any work with fewer than 24 hours before the due date and time.

Due dates and extensions

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Assignments are due – on Canvas – before class time on the dates indicated; late papers will see a deduction of 3 points per day. Extensions in the case of special circumstances can be discussed, again with more than 24 hours notice.

Plagiarism:

Plagiarism is the use of someone else's words or ideas without proper attribution. The act of plagiarism is in violation of JMU's Honor Code, and therefore, anyone caught plagiarizing will be given at minimum a failing grade of zero for the assignment, while especially flagrant cases may result in failing the course. We will discuss the definition of plagiarism early in the semester, but if you have any questions at all, please ask. You should also consult the Honor Code: <http://www.jmu.edu/honor/code.shtml>.

Accommodations Statement

Your success in this class is important to me. I assume that all of us learn in different ways, and that the organization of any course will accommodate each student differently. Please talk to me as soon as you can about your individual learning needs and how this course can best accommodate them. If there are circumstances that may affect your performance in this class, please let me know as soon as possible so that we can work together to develop strategies for adapting assignments to meet both your needs and the requirements of the course. Any student who feels s/he may need an accommodation based on the impact of a disability should contact the Office of Disability Services at (540) 568-6705. If you have a current Access Plan, or if you have questions about this, please talk with me.

Class Cancellation Policy: In the event that the University cancels classes, please check your email and/or Canvas for an update on the rescheduling of this class.

Assignment Outline

Week 1: Defining our Terms

January 7

Introductions and Syllabus

January 9

Excerpt from David Haines, *Safe Haven? A History of Refugees in America* (on Canvas)

Emmy Pérez, "Not One More Refugee Death" (on Canvas)

Week 2: Memoirs of a Cuban Refugee

January 14

Eire, *Waiting for Snow in Havana*

January 16

Eire, *Waiting for Snow in Havana*

Week 3: Memoirs of a Cuban Refugee

January 21

No Class: Martin Luther King, Jr. Day

January 23

Eire, *Waiting for Snow in Havana*

Short Essay 1 Assigned

Week 4: Fiction of a Dominican Refugee

January 28

Alvarez, *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents*

January 30

Alvarez, *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents*

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Week 5: Fiction of a Dominican Refugee

February 4

Alvarez, *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents*

February 6

Short Essay 1 Due

Story Maps Information Session (location TBD)

Week 6: Fiction of a Salvadoran Refugee

February 11

Martinez, *Mother Tongue*

February 13

Martinez, *Mother Tongue*

Week 7: Fiction from El Salvador to Guatemala

February 18

Martinez, *Mother Tongue*

February 20

Tobar, *The Tattooed Soldier*

Week 8: Fiction of a Guatemalan Refugee

February 25

Tobar, *The Tattooed Soldier*

February 27

Tobar, *The Tattooed Soldier*

SPRING BREAK MARCH 4-8

Week 9: From Guatemala to the USA

March 11

Tobar, *The Tattooed Soldier*

March 13

Story Maps Working Session (location TBD)

Week 10: Refugees of Mexico

March 18

Crossing Over (film)

March 20

Story Maps Working Session (location TBD)

Week 11: Child Refugees

March 25

Which Way Home? (film)

March 27

Luiselli, *Tell Me How it Ends*

Short Essay 2 Due

Week 12: Child Refugees

April 1

Luiselli, *Tell Me How it Ends*

April 3

Luiselli, *Tell Me How it Ends*

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Week 13: Child Refugees

April 8

Dreaming America

April 10

Zamora, *Unaccompanied*

Week 14: Final Presentations

April 15

Presentation groups 1-3

April 17

Presentation groups 4-6

Week 15: Wrapping Up

April 22

Final Story Maps working session

April 24

Reflections, evaluations