



POLITICAL PEDAGOGIES



# Migration, Displacement, and Higher Education Now What?

*Edited by*  
Brittany Murray  
Matthew Brill-Carlat  
Maria Höhn

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# Political Pedagogies

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Brittany Murray  
Matthew Brill-Carlat • Maria Höhn  
Editors

# Migration, Displacement, and Higher Education

Now What?

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Image by Amy Kaslow, a writer and photographer with a lens on at-risk societies worldwide

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# If Not Now, When?

*Brittany Murray, Matthew Brill-Carlat, and Maria Höhn*

The burgeoning field of Refugee, Migration, and Displacement Studies has documented in great detail that displaced people face disproportionate educational, economic, and political barriers—whether in transit, in camps, or after resettling. Our community of academics can agree on defining these challenges, at least in broad strokes. Indeed, we know enough about the scope and challenges that forced migration and displacement present to our world to advance a simple but ambitious question: What comes next?

Our undergraduate students ask the same question: What do we do now? Their syllabi are crammed with devastating, critical analyses of the myriad ways in which our societies sit on dense layers of social and economic precarity, felt to varying degrees across politicized identities. Students often reach the end of the semester exhausted, spit out of their

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warp-speed guided tours of everything wrong with the world, sometimes with little guidance on how things might be done differently. Their clamor for creative, practical solutions is understandable. After all, their generation is coming of age in a time when the issue of global displacement is becoming ever more urgent. As engaged citizens and future leaders, they will have to act bravely and quickly to lessen the human costs of forced migration.

Many academics, NGOs, and civil society actors see forced migration as a generation-defining issue at a moment in history when closing boundaries are threatening to destabilize our hard-won spirit of global cooperation and knowledge sharing. Thus, confronting forced migration requires nothing less than a creative, daring rethinking of higher education curricula and modes of operating.

In assembling this collection, we were encouraged by previous scholarly efforts to shape public discourse about migration and to imagine institutional growth at the university level. Our work these past years as founding members of the Consortium on Forced Migration, Displacement, and Education (CFMDE), funded by The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, emboldened the vision for this essay collection. Collaboration and the joining of intellectual and material resources to address this generational challenge is at the heart of this project, as is the call to broaden our predominant focus on theory by considering a rigorous engagement with action. The moment is right for a pedagogical toolkit like this book, with practical examples of community-engaged learning, written in a style engaging to students and instructors alike.<sup>1</sup>

The authors of the following chapters could not agree more. They offer thoughtful, compelling models of how colleges and universities can respond to the challenges posed by forced migration. They marshal the traditional resources of higher education—the syllabus, the major, minor, or certificate, the publications and research—while asking readers to think creatively about other resources: the physical space of campus; the bonds of solidarity among students, faculty, and community members; the opportunity for transnational exchanges assisted by technology. Put

<sup>1</sup> A wealth of books has been published about the global phenomenon, and even an array of works on what forced migration means for higher education, but less attention has been devoted to pedagogy. See, for example, *Refugees in Higher Education: Debate, Discourse and Practice* (Stevenson and Baker, 2018), *Refugees and Higher Education: Transnational Perspectives on Access, Equity, and Internationalization* (Lykes, Aker, Aksoz Efe, et al. 2020), and *Opening Up the University: Teaching and Learning with Refugees* (Cantat, Cook, Rajaram, 2022).

simply, these essays represent the ideas and texts we've wanted to assign in our own classes.

With a focus on undergraduate education at U.S.-based institutions, this collection nonetheless draws breadth from those institutions' transnational partnerships with universities, research centers, and NGOs that might not previously have been on their radar. The curricular models presented here were developed with partners in Palestine, Kenya, Jordan, Switzerland, Greece, Rwanda, Germany, Djibouti, Indonesia, and elsewhere. While our contributors address the global challenges of forced migration in ways that transcend national boundaries, they also insist that attention be paid to the particularities of each local context. We are all concerned with how status, right to remain, access to forms of education, cultural sensitivities affecting curriculum, technical infrastructure, and more, differ across space, time, and politicized identities. These essays stress the impact of national policies but also highlight how local, community-engaged action, informed by deep engagement with the burgeoning scholarship on migration and displacement, can make the commitments and promises of the Liberal Arts newly relevant.

But first, some global context. Forced displacement, as we currently understand it, is not a new challenge. Even if we limit our scope of inquiry to after the rise of the modern nation-state, history is marked by examples of individuals, families, and whole communities being forced from their homes. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), founded in 1950, has defined refugees as "people who have fled war, violence, conflict or persecution and have crossed an international border to find safety in another country." Many—if not most—of the people currently displaced around the world lack that formal legal status and the accompanying rights and protections afforded under international law. By the end of 2021, there were 26.6 million refugees, and more than 84 million individuals designated as Internally Displaced People, according to UNHCR.<sup>2</sup>

We, and many of the authors in this collection, use the terms "forced migration" and "displacement" in a broader sense than does UNHCR. We do this to encompass a fuller range of people compelled to leave their homes—by, for example, gender-based violence or climate change. Our definition includes, but is not limited to, the legal definitions of "refugee"

<sup>2</sup>UNHCR, "Figures at a Glance," <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/figures-at-a-glance.html>, last accessed April 2, 2022.

or “asylum seeker.” Many essays in this collection challenge or expand upon the existing language of forced migration and displacement, asking us to reconsider *all* forces that compel people to flee.

This wider understanding of displacement compels us also to deconstruct the prevailing language of “crisis” in much political and public discourse about migration. Photographs from the Sonoran Desert and the Mediterranean Sea caught the attention of Western eyes in 2014-15, for example, but forced displacement and migrant deaths have been happening in those places and others for decades. Because so much of global migration is Global South to Global South, it does not get as much attention in the U.S. and the Global North as it warrants.<sup>3</sup> We, the editors, aware of displacement as an enduring global issue, began to ramp up efforts in curricular innovation in the last few years, so that we, as teachers and educators, can effectively prepare our students to meet this global challenge. We share an understanding that insofar that migration is a crisis, it is a crisis of past and present policy, especially in the Global North. We specifically point to the reverberations of colonial policy, economic inequality between hemispheres, and the North’s disproportionate responsibility for global warming.

Unfortunately, we are all quite familiar by now with the Global North’s pattern of selective welcoming of refugees and asylum seekers. The most recent (at the time of this writing) crisis of forced displacement of millions of people was impelled by Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. While, in some instances, there have been inspiring examples of hospitality and solidarity, that conflict has also exposed contradictions and inequities along racial, ethnic, and geographical lines. European countries, once ambivalent or even deliberately obstructive to the resettlement of refugees from Syria, Afghanistan, Somalia, or Eritrea, are now eager to embrace Ukrainian refugees. Americans who clamored for a wall high enough to keep out migrants entering through Mexico are now competing to stand in solidarity with refugees from Ukraine. Even within the growing numbers of people displaced from Ukraine, we have seen sharply unequal treatment. Citizens, visitors, and exchange students of color who fled alongside

<sup>3</sup>The World Bank provides exhaustive data from 1960 until 2020 in “Refugee population by country or territory of asylum,” World Bank, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SM.POP.REFG?end=2020&start=1960>; last accessed 11 April 2022.

their neighbors have often been denied the warm, fraternal embrace that white Ukrainians received.<sup>4</sup>

The challenge for us as educators is to explore with our students the reality that displacement does not only happen “over there,” to “other people,” as was the dominant framing of the 2014–2015 refugee “crises” in Europe and Central America. Mass migrations and governmental policies put in place to control them, in the end, affect all of us. In the U.S., for example, about 200 million people—two of every three Americans—live within 100 miles of a border, the area where the U.S. Border Patrol can operate. A traffic stop, public school enrollment, a lease application, or a job interview can be sites of bordering practices. Borders get pushed inside frontiers, and they also become stretched beyond them: they are internalized and externalized. Across the Atlantic, FRONTEX is a case in point. Europe’s control of migration has pushed boundaries outside the continent, because European tax money is paying countries—some with dubious human rights records—hefty sums to prevent migrants from reaching European shores.<sup>5</sup> We should point out that, while Europe’s boundaries are being pushed out beyond the continent, EU laws and human rights protections do not travel with them, in an echo of earlier colonial policies.

So how do we as educators prepare students for this new reality? How do we respond to their questions of “Now What?” in the face of such traumatic upheavals and suffering? Universities and colleges in the U.S., but also in Turkey and Mexico, have stepped up to such challenges in the past by hosting scholars and students from Nazi Germany and Nazi-occupied Europe.<sup>6</sup> Hungarians fleeing Soviet persecution after the 1956 revolution and Soviet Jews fleeing anti-Semitism during the 1980s also were able to build life anew in universities in Europe and the U.S. Today,

<sup>4</sup>Peter Gatrell, “Europe, the ‘Dark Continent,’ Is the Stage for Another Great Migration,” *New York Times*, Opinion, March 14, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/14/opinion/ukraine-refugees-europe.html?referringSource=articleShare>

<sup>5</sup>On Frontex, see: Isabel Hilpert, “The Externalization of Border Control and the Dynamism between the European Center and the European Peripheries,” *EuropeNow* 46 (February 2022), <https://www.europenowjournal.org/2022/01/30/the-externalization-of-border-control-and-the-dynamism-between-the-european-center-and-the-european-peripheries/>.

<sup>6</sup>The Colegio de México, now one of Mexico’s most important universities, for example, was founded by European refugees in 1938-40. For more information on this history, see “La historia de El Colegio de México,” Colegio de México, <https://www.colmex.mx/historia>, last accessed April 9, 2022.



with the support of Scholars At Risk and the Institute of International Education-Scholars Rescue Fund, colleges and universities have taken such steps in the wake of the Syrian civil war. According to IIE documentation, the five countries that hosted the most refugee scholars in 2021 were the U.S., Egypt, Canada, Jordan, and the UK. Refugee scholars have also been hosted by universities in Malaysia, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Sudan, Iraqi Kurdistan, Colombia, Chile, and the United Arab Emirates.<sup>7</sup> Many schools are now working feverishly to address the anticipated displacement of scholars from Eastern Europe and Russia.

The academy's past interventions inspired some of our own schools to welcome refugee students and faculty. Yet it is also important to acknowledge how the context of today's engagement has shifted. Educators concerned with the challenges posed by displacement are no longer thinking of ad hoc responses to isolated crises or the rescue of individual scholars or students. Indeed, the twenty-first-century classroom demands coordinated, ongoing efforts to overcome systemic challenges such as global displacement on this scale. Additionally, our students are voicing new concerns. Our classrooms are international; diverse viewpoints animate discussion, and many students bring direct experiences of displacement to bear on their contributions. Students make poignant requests to decolonize the curriculum, calling to account both the subjects and methods of analysis, which often reflect historical inequities—and can and should be repurposed to instead change the balance of power.

Migrant knowledges are integral to the intellectual life of the university, especially at a time when institutions are decolonizing their curricula. Migrant knowledges demand that we ask difficult questions about infrastructure, interrogating how educational spaces and material resources are distributed. Moreover, this effort calls upon us to reach beyond the campus for insight and solidarity. The challenge of rethinking the curriculum has compelled us and many of our contributors to strengthen connections to local communities. It goes without saying that these connections are guided by the principles of equity and reciprocity; the label “service learning” does not suffice to describe what might better be characterized as horizontal partnerships. We understand these shared efforts as beyond mere do-gooderism.

<sup>7</sup>Institute for International Education, “Scholar Rescue Fund—About Us,” <https://www.scholarrescuefund.org/about-us/videos/>, last accessed April 3, 2022.

As we, the editors, were thinking through how to structure our own efforts, we thought that we could not be the only ones weighing these questions. Indeed, we were delighted to find fellow travelers along the way, creative and engaged pedagogues who introduced us to a broad range of projects. We present a sampling of some of the most innovative work to spark conversation among like-minded colleagues on how we can live up to the values we declare so often in the name of the Liberal Arts. We were thrilled to learn about, and learn from, the work being done by this book's wide range of contributors: students, researchers, educators, and people affected by displacement.

The essays collected here are meant to be a living volume—a grouping of insights and inspirations that can help educators and students alike to create effective, impactful ways to get engaged, or deepen one's engagement, with the challenge of forced migration. Many of these innovative interventions were made possible on shoestring budgets, or outside traditional avenues of university support. Their authors all insist that the undergraduate liberal arts classroom is an untapped well of competence that can be drawn on when existing competencies and expertise are overdrawn, or sluggish in responding. Our contributors come from a broad range of disciplines, including STEM and pre-professional fields: Law, Languages and Literatures, Medical Anthropology, Classics, Architecture, Computer Science, Geography, Linguistics, Film, Education, Biology, Psychology, and History. To enhance this collection, we also privileged projects that were daring in breaking down deeply embedded disciplinary boundaries.

As we noted above, the innovative curricula presented here all foreground horizontal relationships between teacher and student, campus and public, researcher and affected community. They model how community-engaged liberal arts and sciences classes may involve varied activities, but all emphasize reflective learning and go beyond the traditional "service" model. The crucial point to drive home to students is that new knowledge is not produced only by the customary forms of research and theorizing to which they are exposed in most postsecondary classes. Let us be clear: we do not reject critical theories and analyses. To the contrary, the reader will find the following pages full of carefully sharpened critiques of the status quo. Each essay in this collection frames its central problem with critical analysis, in order to explore the solution(s) the author or authors identify. Each contribution then moves to its main point: exploring how faculty, students, and staff can make a real difference in the lives of people who have been forced to migrate.

One of the key challenges for the editors of a collection such as this is to guide the interested reader in navigating essays from a variety of disciplines—and in this case, across the globe. The organizational structure we chose is by no means the only logical one, but it helped us as we conceptualized this book.

In our first section, “Language, Representation, Imagination,” contributors feature the imaginative expression of displaced people, bringing together educators and artists who reflect upon new directions for translation, literature, and the arts. In “A Developing Community of Collaboration in Indiana,” linguist Kelly H. Berkson and her collaborators James C. Wamsley, Samson Lotven, Shobhana Chelliah, Kenneth Van Bik, Sara Champlin, Kimberly Sakhong, Sui Hnem Par, Alina Matthews, and Amanda Bohnert from Indiana University illustrate the close collaboration among researchers, graduate students, undergraduate students, and the Chin refugee community in Bloomington, IN, to impart contextualized, transferable scientific training while also fostering meaningful connections between refugee community members and linguists-in-training eager to make their work matter.

An essay by Brittany Murray, at the University of Tennessee, “Learning Together: Exploring Visual and Textual Narration with Students Affected by Forced Migration,” deals with a class she taught at Vassar College in Summer 2019 to a group of 18 high school students with forced migration backgrounds. A French Studies professor, her course focused on transitions—whether those transitions referred to adolescence or migration—through a variety of visual and textual media. A different kind of learning with, and from, displaced individuals is described by Noura Hajjaj, who teaches communications at SUNY New Paltz. In “Global Cultural Exchange, Women’s Leadership, and Advocacy: Connecting the Hudson Valley and the Gaza Strip through WhatsApp,” Hajjaj discusses how she connects American students with young female students in Gaza *and* provides a toolkit for educators who want to explore similar opportunities for their campuses. Virginia Krause’s “*Refugees and Forced Migration: An Engaged Humanities Course in French and Francophone Studies*” shows how she adapted a course with a broad humanities frame (literary studies, history, philosophy, cinema, and anthropology) by forming a partnership with Women’s Refugee Care, an NGO created to support refugees from central Africa resettled in Providence, RI, home to Brown University, where Krause teaches.

The second section, “Law and Policy in Action,” explores innovative learning models developed in response to federal, state, and local policies that affect people experiencing forced migration. These authors choose particular policies to reframe or challenge, and describe how undergraduates can provide concrete assistance to affected communities of displaced people. In “Education Can’t Wait for LGBTIQ Refugees? Exploring Inclusion and Access to Higher Education in Kakuma Refugee Camp,” Djemila Carron, professor in the Department of Law at the University of Quebec in Montreal, and Paul O’Keeffe, an interdisciplinary specialist in development, migration, and refugee studies at the National University of Ireland, Maynooth, outline how higher education can reach across boundaries—of nations and camps—to provide in-demand human rights law education to refugees that directly addresses their environment and needs. In “Migration, Death, and Disappearance: Education and Engagement in Tucson, Arizona,” Robin Reineke, Assistant Research Social Scientist at the University of Arizona’s Southwest Center, and Bruce Anderson, Forensic Anthropologist for the Pima County Office of the Medical Examiner in Tucson, AZ, discuss their experience teaching forensic anthropology students about the invisibilized deaths caused by U.S. border policy that pushes migrants into the Sonoran Desert to cross the border; their work includes how to return remains to families.

In “Teaching Undergraduate Forced Migration Studies through a Community-based Law and Policy Clinic during Covid: What Are the Crises and Opportunities?” Doug Smith, Lecturer in Legal Studies at Brandeis University, writes with student Alejandro Bracamontes, a DOJ-accredited representative and the Executive Director of The Right to Immigration Institute (TRII), about their immigration law clinic—in particular, their efforts to continue work throughout the Covid-19 pandemic and shutdown. Next is “Court Interpretation, or Ganas Goes Legit” by Jonathan Pitcher, who teaches Spanish at Bennington College. Pitcher reflects on a course he teaches that prepares students to become certified Spanish-English interpreters, who can responsibly transmit migrants’ ideas and needs to officials with whom they come in contact, particularly during times of heightened stress, such as medical emergencies, police interactions, or court hearings. This section concludes with “Searching for Safety and Researching for Justice: Documenting Migrant Experiences in the Paso del Norte Border Region” by Jeremy Slack and Neil Harvey, from the Sociology and Anthropology Departments at the University of Texas at El Paso. Together with their former students Nancy Mateo, Zaira

Martin, Kathryn Garcia, Alondra Aca Garcia, Daniel Avitia, and Ava McElhone Yates, they describe a summer research program that investigates new forms of state-sanctioned violence in the Paso del Norte region in partnership with local activists who respond to these policies.

The third section, “Reimagining Space and Spaces,” highlights rethinking our relationships to the built environment and imagining new approaches to architecture, urban planning, geography, and design, informed by the perspectives of displaced people. When conceptualizing space and belonging for those affected by forced migration, the temptation is to look “over there,” beyond the walls of our campuses or even beyond the U.S. However, the effects of forced migration hit close to home and can reshape familiar spaces. Ayham Dalal, a Palestinian architect from Jordan, then at the Technische Universität Berlin, now at the Université de Poitiers challenges his own field in “Lessons Learned from Refugee Camps: From Fetishizing Design to Researching, Drawing, and Co-Producing.” Dalal worked on-location in Jordan and Berlin to develop appropriate housing for refugees. He combines knowledge gleaned on-site with experience, adapting this model to an undergraduate, virtual course at Vassar College. Kostis Kourelis, who teaches in the Classics Department at Franklin & Marshall College, offers a discussion of the process of decolonizing the syllabus and critiquing exclusionary ideologies dormant in the humanities. In his article, “The Archaeology of Forced Migration in Greece: A Layered Pedagogy,” Kourelis describes taking his students to Greece to explore archeological sites of past displacements, in whose vicinity are now housed refugees of the Syrian and Afghan wars.

Brian Tomaszewski, a computer science professor at the Rochester Institute of Technology, describes his multilayered collaboration with refugees, NGOs, and corporate funders to teach GIS mapping to displaced individuals in Jordan and Rwanda. In “Teaching Forced Displacement with Geospatial Technology in Refugee Camps: Lessons from Rwanda and Jordan,” he describes why local actors and voices are so important if learned skills are to persist beyond a particular project. We close this section with Joseph Nevins, Professor of Geography at Vassar College, and his thought-provoking discussion, “On the Pedagogical Value of Not Going There: Mobility, Fossil Fuel Consumption, and the Production of Refugees.” Having taught the challenges of migration and displacement by visiting heavily policed borderlands, as well as refugee camps and detention centers, Nevins urges us to take a different route. He suggests that the exercise of *immobility* can also help students and faculty to challenge

the socio-ecological inequities that limit the mobility of refugees and other people on the move.

Contesting the notion that inclusion is a courtesy uniquely extended from host to guest, our fourth section, “Belonging and Inclusion,” presents inclusion as a relationship forged through collaboration and reciprocity. Local knowledges and voices are foregrounded, as contributors critically reconsider who shapes the boundaries of belonging. Building new foundations of community can be challenging in settings marked by historical inequality, and each author examines these challenges lucidly while offering best practices gleaned from experience. The essays here introduce creative and inspiring models for inclusion, drawing from resources across the curriculum in the sciences, the humanities, and the arts. Diya Abdo, Professor of English at Guilford College, presents her award-winning project in “Teaching Tragedy: Towards a Pedagogy of Accountability—The Every Campus a Refugee Model.” She details how colleges can be places of refugee resettlement, describing how she built a program of engaged work and study designed to transcend poverty tourism and the spectacle of tragedy, focusing instead upon prioritizing hosted refugees’ agency, privacy, and dignity. “The Power of Participatory and Immersive Filmmaking” is written by Peter Decherney, Professor of Film at the University of Pennsylvania, who has been taking his students to Kakuma refugee camp in Kenya, where they partnered with refugees to create virtual reality films. This essay explores changing the narratives of forced migration with new technologies, but also testifies to the value of well-considered partnerships among faculty, students, and displaced individuals.

In another essay on the complexities of horizontal partnerships with displaced individuals and communities, Vassar College students Aena Khan, Faith Northern, Sofia Rao, and Adam Weil (writing with their professor, Maria Hantzopoulos) reflect on a planned study trip to Athens, Greece, to work with educators at an informal school for refugees. Covid-19 derailed their planned trip to Greece, but the students discuss in “Finding Place: Strengthening Pedagogical Practices on Forced Migration Through Interpersonal Understanding in Higher Education” how they used digital tools to keep the partnership productive and describe the virtual workshops they designed for educators of refugees. Next, Jodi Schwarz, Professor of Biology at Vassar College, explores inclusion and belonging based on her own work on making STEM fields more hospitable to traditionally marginalized student populations. Her “Climate

Change, Human Displacement, and STEM Education: Toward a More Transdisciplinary and Inclusive Culture of Science” offers new approaches to bridge STEM fields and the humanities more generally, including by prompting students to work with, and learn from, displaced populations. The final essay in this section comes from Alberto Gelmi, Professor of Italian at Vassar College, and Halima Akhlaqi, a former educator in Cisarua Refugee Learning Centre. In “Reading Eveline in Jakarta: Community Learning with Hazara Refugees,” the two discuss their work at Cisarua, where they led literary study with refugee students and conducted professional-development workshops with educators of refugees. They demonstrate the value, and surprising insights, that emerge from deep engagement with the humanities and Liberal Arts.

In our fifth and final section, “Trauma, Memory, Postmemory, Healing,” the authors confront the damage displacement causes to communities—damage that often requires time and multifaceted, multimedia approaches to heal. The essays in this section argue that oral histories, photography, new approaches to historical study, and a wholesale reframing of mental health care in the context of forced migration can explain and treat the trauma of displacement. Heather N. Stone, an educator and oral historian at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette, illustrates in “Place-Conscious Education: Teaching Displacement Using Oral Histories in Virtual Reality” the double displacement of native peoples, first by encroaching nineteenth-century white settlers and then by rising sea levels. She shows how virtual reality can be effectively used to turn middle school students into active researchers on the disappearing coastline of Louisiana, and the impact of global warming on the Tribe of the Biloxi-Chitimacha-Choctaw who live on the Isle de Jean Charles. Adam Brown, Director of the Trauma and Global Mental Health Lab at The New School, and Alexa Elias, a master’s student in global mental health at King’s College London, explore the productive intersection between humanities scholarship and mental health research in their chapter, “Learning at the Borders: How an Experiential Learning Course in Bern, Switzerland, Transformed Undergraduate Learning about Memory, Mental Health, and Displacement.” Building upon research about the importance of autobiographical memories and self-narratives, Brown and Elias explain what undergraduate students and researchers from the New School and elsewhere are learning about how intergenerational memories can help families to heal the trauma of forced displacement.

Matthew Brill-Carlat and Maria Höhn write about their experience teaching a class with seven Vassar College students and six refugee students who had recently been resettled in Berlin, Germany, in “Rebuilding After War and Genocide: Learning With and From Refugees in the Transnational Digital Classroom.” Taught in 2018, the class mobilized two of the big lessons of postwar European history—that rebuilding a war-torn country *is* possible and that there *is* precedent for European countries, Germany included, welcoming large numbers of refugees in the past—to educate and energize the students in Berlin and Poughkeepsie alike. Höhn and Brill-Carlat discuss the possibilities that the transnational digital seminar offers to a rapidly shifting higher education landscape. Nathalie Peutz, in “Small Things,” describes an experiential-learning course that she led with students from NYU Abu Dhabi and Yemeni students resettled in the Markazi refugee camp in Djibouti, including a collaborative photography project documenting daily life in Markazi. Her contribution movingly documents the complex outcomes of such a project, as NYU Abu Dhabi students and Markazi participants reflect upon the value, and the inequities, of transnational partnerships and on-site learning together.

### LESSONS LEARNED, QUESTIONS ASKED

As broad and diverse as these innovative community-engaged classes and projects of our contributors are, and no matter whether they were implemented in the United States or abroad, or whether they were concerned with the law, space, language, or memory and trauma, all brought forth key lessons that we believe will prove helpful to pedagogues and students alike. All contributors urged us to reconsider critically where we teach, where the academy’s boundaries are drawn, and how technology is changing that understanding. Their contributions spark lively dialogue about the value of travel, the ethical case for refraining from travel, the mixed effects of bringing together students and refugees in camps, and the possibilities for digitally enabled hybrid courses.

In other words, should students studying forced migration “go there”? As Joseph Nevins argues in his chapter, the “hypermobility enjoyed by some—not least academics and students at well-resourced institutions—is related to the highly constrained mobility of others.” The use of money and fossil fuels to give students “on-the-ground” experience, he says, can wind up “effectively ‘teaching’ students that the exercise of hypermobility



and the consumption of a disproportionate share of the world's resources are justifiable in the pursuit of knowledge." The hypermobility of wealthy Western communities is, of course, one major factor in global border regimes and rising climate change.

On the other hand, Nathalie Peutz suggests that stepping onto a plane and into another community can have unexpected and pedagogically transformative consequences. When she took her students to a refugee camp in Djibouti, she found that their refugee interlocutors "converted what I had planned as a fairly sober course (with far too much reading) into intimate, social encounters: ones in which the refugees were not the subjects of our lessons, but our teachers and our hosts." Being physically present—invited to gatherings and into homes—allowed her to cede more pedagogical control than would have been possible in a remote-learning course. Put another way, teaching in-person opened up the class to benefit more from migrant knowledges, a theme we touch on below.

Ayham Dalal offers a third assessment of the complications of working on-site with displaced individuals and communities. He demands a rethinking of the discipline of architecture—including more research and reflection—and a reorientation of a common designer mentality in the context of refugee housing in camps. That is, he highlights the fruits of designing with humility, and accounting for what refugees want and need, rather than working solely from what an NGO or camp authorities deem necessary. Djemila Carron and Paul O'Keeffe point the way to a hybrid model, with visits by instructors at the beginning and end of a term, and digital connections during the semester. The in-person visits to students in Kakuma Refugee Camp, the authors found, enriched the experience for instructors and students alike and built the foundation on which ensuing weeks of remote learning rested.

The debate over whether or not to "go there" intersects with the question we raised about where forced migration happens. Many of our contributors work in regions that are directly affected. Bruce Anderson and Robin Reineke discuss training students to reunite families with the remains of their loved ones who died crossing from Mexico to the U.S. These deaths are often made invisible; part of their pedagogical work is teaching students to understand the consequences of U.S. immigration policy that happen all around them. College campuses situated far from ports of entry can be focal points for engaged study of, and response to, forced migration. Diya Abdo writes about the Every Campus A Refugee (ECAR) initiative, which she founded at Guilford College to welcome

newly arrived refugees. Colleges and universities have housing, Wi-Fi, career counselors, and other resources that can be put to work to welcome refugees as they arrive in the United States. ECAR turns the typical model of community-engaged courses on its head; as Abdo writes, “students are no longer going out there; rather, we are bringing the community into our space, thus reframing for whom campus space can and should be used. And rather than a testing or training ground for our students, our community partners are co-educators and co-trainers.”

Altogether, our contributors demonstrate the myriad ways that faculty and students are re-conceptualizing the space of the campus and of forced migration. From Jonathan Pitcher’s essay about interpretation services for migrant workers in rural Vermont, to Virginia Krause’s work with refugee communities in Providence, RI, our contributors show that work with forced migration can be done in urban and rural settings. As shown by the Boston-area legal clinic described by Doug Smith and Alejandro Bracamontes, students need not travel to a border to intervene on behalf of migrants; sometimes they just have to walk a couple blocks beyond their campus.

For years, liberal arts institutions have pondered how to develop the new community-engaged and social justice classes students have been clamoring for. The multifaceted challenge of forced migration offers educators rich opportunities to overcome boundaries between on-campus and off-campus study, disciplines, and undergraduate and graduate students. Adam Brown’s work with mental health researchers and undergraduate liberal arts students and Kelly Berkson et al.’s collaboration between undergraduate and graduate students demonstrate that the undergraduate classroom can be a source of technical competence and pedagogical innovation that can then be taken outside the classroom. Peter Decherney joined film students from the University of Pennsylvania with filmmakers in Kakuma and Kalobeyei refugee camps to produce groundbreaking VR and 360 degree films. Heather Stone used VR technology to connect her students with indigenous communities and local middle school classrooms.

The essays in this collection also upend assumptions about who teaches and who learns in inspiring, and often unexpected, ways. They challenge the received wisdom of pedagogues in the Global North. These cooperative relationships offered genuine surprises and productive challenges, even to beliefs adopted with the best of intentions. The organizers of the New Americans Summer Program, described in this volume by Brittany Murray, had initial doubts about the name. Would it be received as

patronizing? Does the nomenclature center U.S. identity at the expense of cultural and linguistic pluralism? Is the title inaccurate for participants who hail from Central or South America? Students, however, explained that they liked the name; for them, it signaled inclusivity, and a marker of their new life. Gelmi and Akhlaqi struggled with similar anxieties in deciding an appropriate text to read with their students. They were just as surprised as Murray when their students in Indonesia insisted on reading a Western text because they thought it most helpful to prepare them for future resettlement abroad. Höhn and her American students learned valuable lessons from their refugee partners about the limits of what they considered universal visual signifiers of the Holocaust.

While it is important to advance with humility, it is equally important to steadfastly pursue projects that refugees themselves identify as urgent. Taking her students to a camp in Djibouti, Nathalie Peutz was understandably anxious about whether this experience held any benefit for the refugees themselves. One of the refugees assured her that the encounter with the NYU students mattered in “things small and large.” What may have seemed a small thing to Peutz and her students, was large to some of the refugees—namely that the students’ time in the camp reminded their refugee interlocutors that the world had not forgotten them. These examples remind us that our strength as educators is not simply determined by our curriculum content, but by the quality of relationships forged as we teach.

### SOME FINAL WORDS

We hope that this first effort to gather scholars, educators, and activists represented here, will initiate a conversation on the need to rethink curricula and practices if educators are to address forced migration. In this spirit, we feature the Selective Bibliography of Forced Migration, <http://forcedmigrationbib.vassarspaces.net/>, a student-driven, faculty-mentored project that has blossomed into an expansive, innovative open-source toolkit, a living resource that complements this book.<sup>8</sup> Inspired by the

<sup>8</sup>Selective Bibliography of Forced Migration, <http://forcedmigrationbib.vassarspaces.net/>, last accessed April 11, 2022. For a description of this project, see Elijah Appelson, Matthew Brill-Carlat, Samantha Cavagnolo, Violet Cenedella, Angie Diaz, Kaiya John, Naima Nader, and Haru Sugishita, “A Selective Bibliography of Forced Migration: Resources for A New Generation of Discourse,” *EuropeNow* 36 (August 2020), <https://www.europenowjournal.org/2020/10/11/a-selective-bibliography-of-forced-migration-resources-for-a-new-generation-of-discourse/>.

Charleston syllabus, which facilitated a nationwide conversation about racism and anti-racism, the Selective Bibliography, a work in progress, aspires to join a similarly far-reaching conversation about migration and displacement.<sup>9</sup> The bibliography began with Brittany Murray's work with Vassar students, and it has truly blossomed as a result of student ingenuity and perseverance, growing into a repository of ideas for advancing study and teaching models. The bibliography, though still expanding, already offers a wealth of accessible readings, lesson plans, and audiovisual resources for the classroom and beyond. The bibliography depends on community contributions to remain a living and evolving resource, and the founders extend an open invitation to educators, students, and engaged readers to share their own research and extend the invitation, in turn, to other schools. Tell us what you know!

In the process of devising new classes and learning from other educators, all of us have learned the importance of humility. Enthusiasm for student work must be paired with careful planning and reflection on how our institutions can serve displaced individuals and communities with whom we partner. Brill-Carlat has written elsewhere, "we must guard against the dangers of an educational politics of shallow engagement and diversity-as-educational-device. If students think that merely being in the same room as someone who has experienced displacement confers an instantaneous understanding of what that person needs from college programming around forced migration and displacement—and the right to post on LinkedIn about working with refugees—it is unlikely that a program of true value" will ever emerge.<sup>10</sup>

Shifting how, where, what, and whom our institutions teach cannot be a cosmetic change. It takes real, hard work to listen to partners—be they scholars from other countries, students in Berlin appearing on a projector screen in Poughkeepsie, or filmmakers and law students in Kakuma refugee camp—and make a clear-eyed assessment of possible shared goals and projects. It requires reinventing the academy's traditional hierarchies and one-way knowledge flows. Only then can we create badly needed democratic and equitable relations between people and societies, and more

<sup>9</sup> Keisha N. Blain, Melissa Morrone, Ryan P. Randall, Cecily Walker, Chad Williams and Kidada Williams. "#Charlestonsyllabus." *AAIHS*, 19 June 2015, <https://www.aaihs.org/resources/charlestonsyllabus/>, last accessed May 15, 2022.

<sup>10</sup> Matthew Brill-Carlat, "Forced Migration, Student Responses, and the Liberal Arts," *EuropeNow* 25 (March 2019), <https://www.europenowjournal.org/2019/03/04/forced-migration-student-responses-and-the-liberal-arts/>.

sustainable ways of living that allow people to stay in their homes if they choose, and the resources to make home anew when necessary.

Radically rethinking whom, what, where, and how we teach is no act of charity, but rather an investment in a partnership that will fulfill the educational aims of everyone involved. Indeed, valuing knowledge held by displaced people shakes up humanitarian structures that pigeonhole displaced people as powerless subjects who rely on the stream of material goods and knowledge that Western countries and NGOs aim indiscriminately at neighborhoods and camps. Those who are more fortunate have an obligation to help by providing material goods and/or academic training, but we should not delude ourselves that partnering with displaced people only benefits them.

If colleges and universities wish to retain their claim to intellectual leadership of civil society during this fraught time, there is much to be done. We believe that a considered institutional response to forced migration, including curriculum development, will allow universities to position their students and graduates to thrive in fields that displacement will shape for decades. In order to make this change—and a convincing argument for continued relevance—the academy must open itself to reward unconventional teaching and projects. The current incentive structures for promotion and prestige are at loggerheads with the centuries-long history of the university as a place of refuge and innovation. We must re-examine the largely twentieth-century model of our institutions with fresh, twenty-first-century eyes.

The next big challenge will be to transform our institutions to make cementing and scaling up this work more feasible. Our most satisfying accomplishments have been produced by fully embedding student activism and faculty leadership in the curriculum (see: <https://migration-displacement.vassar.edu/>). Left alone in the shifting (not to mention oft-ignored) landscape of extracurricular ventures, there are currently few ways to develop and institutionalize worthy projects. Everything about the way we do business will have to change: how community-engaged work is incentivized in promotion and hiring structures, where a college chooses to draw the outermost boundary of its campus and its student body, and more. Perhaps now is the time to explore how digital features can enhance curriculum and make coursework accessible to an expanded community of learners. Now is absolutely the time to strengthen partnerships among institutions—large universities, small liberal arts colleges, community colleges, grassroots organizations—to scale up impact.

When we started this book, none of us could have imagined that a new crisis of mass displacement would be unfolding as Ukrainians flee the Russian invasion of February 2022. Forced migration and displacement are truly global challenges; higher education must do its part to prepare conscientious, empathetic, knowledgeable, and savvy future thinkers and doers.

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PART I

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Language, Representation,  
Imagination



# A Developing Community of Collaboration in Indiana

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## INTRODUCTION

Everywhere humans interact, there is language: in schools and government offices, in songs and stories, in celebrations and mourning.<sup>1</sup> Through language we learn, discuss, and move to address the social and global

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issues that affect us. This chapter is co-authored by faculty and students, many of whom have expertise in linguistics, the scientific study of human language. While some of our work is abstract, we also care deeply about the human context of language. We often engage with questions such as the following: Who decides which languages are used to create resources? How do forcibly displaced people find information about novel threats like Covid-19? And, crucially, how can we use our expertise to respond to the language-related needs of such a community?

This chapter describes the model for community-engaged research developed by the Chin Languages Research Project (CLRP). Based at Indiana University in Bloomington, the CLRP is a collaboration between faculty and students in speech sciences, public health, and beyond. Some of us are members of the Burmese refugee community, primarily of Indianapolis. Our shared objective is to foster meaningful connections to support merging the pursuits of education, research, and service.

The CLRP model is a community-centered approach where faculty cultivate and support connections between linguistics students and undergraduate speakers of Chin languages (languages originally centered in Chin State in Burma).<sup>2</sup> We provide targeted mentoring for student team members, who work collaboratively to propose, conduct, and publish valuable research while simultaneously raising awareness about relevant issues and creating useful practical resources for community members (e.g., translations of Covid-19 and vaccine information).<sup>3</sup> By adopting this model, we:

1. connect with and support a group of underrepresented, first-generation students;
2. impart contextualized, transferable scientific training;

<sup>2</sup>We use the term Burma throughout to refer to the country known globally as Burma/Myanmar, because this is the name preferred by most of our Chin team members.

<sup>3</sup>General information and examples of practical resources can be found at <https://www.chinlanguages.org/> and student-authored working papers can be found at <https://scholarworks.iu.edu/journals/index.php/iwpsalc>.

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3. foster meaningful connections between refugee community members and student linguists-in-training who are hungry to do community-based work;
4. conduct novel scientific research with a group of under-documented languages; and
5. rapidly adapt outreach initiatives to meet the community's evolving needs.

This chapter describes both CLRP and Linguistically Underserved Communities and Health (LUCAH), a joint project with the University of North Texas (UNT) and California State University, Fullerton (CSUF), that collects and analyzes in-language interviews about Covid-19, health, and wellness in the Central Indiana Burmese community. These interviews offer opportunities for linguistic data collection while illuminating the experiences of community members. Topics of discussion include conceptualizations of health, where to obtain health information, and personal experiences during the pandemic. In conclusion, we share key take-aways from our work about student learning through service and community-led research and suggest ways to adapt our project structure for use elsewhere, with different language communities.

The backdrop for CLRP is Indiana, current home of more than 25,000 Burmese refugees (Hoffmann 2018; Lotven et al. 2020). Many hail from Chin State in western Burma. The Chin community in Indianapolis consists of about 20,000 people (Salaz and Raymer 2020), up from 15,000 in 2016 (Bik 2016). It is linguistically rich—dozens of under- and undocumented languages, mostly from the Kuki-Chin subgroup of the Tibeto-Burman language family, are spoken there (Berkson et al. 2019).<sup>4</sup> Some of these languages are spoken by hundreds or even thousands of Hoosiers (people from Indiana), yet no scientific inquiry has addressed them. The combined language knowledge of this community is more than enough to keep a team of linguistic researchers busy for several lifetimes. Further, the community has many and varied language needs—communication challenges arise in both urgent situations (e.g., emergency room visits,

<sup>4</sup>The Chin Community of Indiana (CCI), an Indianapolis-based non-profit, reports that for 305 people polled in November 2020, nineteen languages were reported as being used at home. While the eight most reported in that poll were Hakha, Falam, Burmese, Mizo, Mindat, Matu, Lautu (Lutuv), and Tedim (Bualteng 2000), we know that many others (such as Mara, Senthang, and Zotung) are also well represented.

the Covid-19 pandemic) and daily life (e.g., buying a car, getting a driver's license).

An hour south of the Indianapolis community is Indiana University Bloomington (IUB), whose Linguistics Department has long housed robust graduate and undergraduate programs as well as a history of training students in fieldwork with speakers of under-resourced languages. As more students from the Indianapolis Chin community enroll at IUB, a unique opportunity to blend mentorship, linguistic research, and practical experience has emerged. In response to this moment, we are building the Chin Languages Research Project. Our team includes Chin and non-Chin students and faculty who work closely together and strive to think creatively about *knowledge*, *expertise*, and *ability*. Each of us brings to the project distinct strengths and insights, and our work is strongest when we pool them. Our Chin student members have keen insights into community needs, rich life experiences with real-world language work (e.g., translation and interpretation), and a wealth of linguistic and cultural knowledge. Our non-Chin linguistics students have a burgeoning set of analytical tools and a desire to put their energy into addressing local, current, relevant needs. Faculty members contribute disciplinary and mentoring expertise and insight into navigating university systems.

While the CLRP is evolving in a specific geographic and scholarly context, such a model could exist in many other contexts. By bringing together students, community members, academic professionals, and representatives from local organizations, community needs can influence both classroom content and learning objectives. Figure 1 illustrates four major groups of stakeholders who are crucial to the success of such endeavors.

These stakeholders bring diverse viewpoints, skills, interests, and priorities to the table, thereby enriching team discussions and decision-making. The CLRP, which began in 2018, currently includes 15 to 20 active members, with another 10 to 15 more loosely involved in advising, research, and mentoring. Non-Chin undergraduate linguistics majors support research efforts while cultivating their own skills. Chin students act as the vital communication link between the research community and the refugee community; they also gain transferable research skills and influence project directions. Graduate students gain research and mentoring experience, for example, conducting dissertation research while serving as project managers. Faculty members impart contextualized, transferable scientific training and serve as allies for students navigating unfamiliar university systems. Administrators help identify funding opportunities to

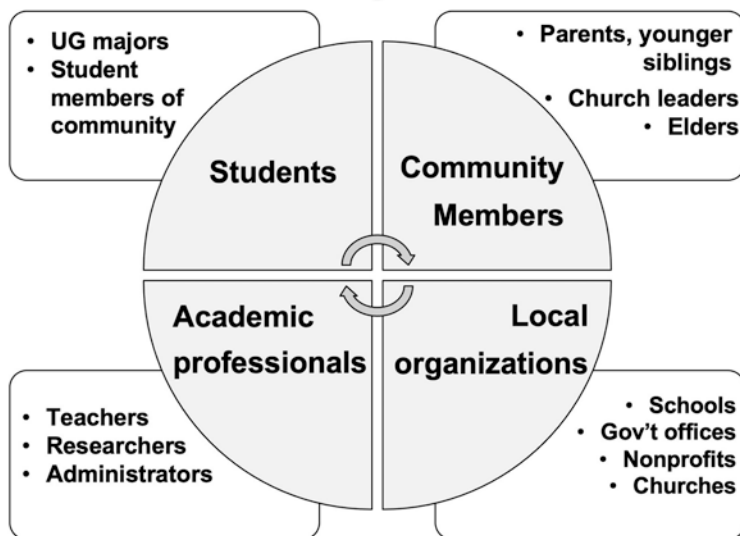


Fig. 1 Stakeholders in communities of collaboration

support undergraduate research training. Local organizations and community members identify specific needs, host events, redirect team efforts in response to changing community needs, and spread information. Projects developed and executed by these diverse partners are necessarily motivated by their varied, local, and relevant concerns.

Many languages are spoken in the Indianapolis community. To date, the CLRP has worked most intensively with Hakha Lai (AKA Hakha Chin or Laiholh), a language of wider communication in both Chin State and Indianapolis (Barron et al. 2007). Our best guess is that it is spoken by 10,000 or more people in Indiana, including several authors of this chapter. We also work with Lutuv (aka Lautu) and Zophei, spoken, respectively, by several hundred and several thousand people in Indianapolis (Berkson et al. 2019; Lotven et al. 2020). Community members tend to be highly multilingual, often speaking many Chin languages—two, three, or even as many as five to ten languages in the case of parents and elders. This degree of multilingualism is stunning to many Americans, and as linguists we perceive the community as immeasurably rich. The wider Indiana population is mostly unaware of this linguistic wealth. Many

Hoosiers do not even know that Indiana has such a large resident Burmese community, let alone such linguistic diversity.

Moreover, our view of *language knowledge as valuable* runs counter to many of our students' lived experiences. Language barriers are everywhere and often prohibitive, making a huge challenge of many everyday experiences (e.g., schooling, job-seeking, interactions with health and government officials). Consider the medical context. Burmese interpreters are the second most requested in Indianapolis (after Spanish), but those requests are very often for speakers of Burmese—not Chin languages—despite the fact that many Chin community members do not speak Burmese (Zart, p.c.). Speakers of Hakha Lai have endured long waits for interpreters to arrive at medical appointments only to find that the interpreter speaks only Burmese, a particular danger in medical emergencies. Requests are also made for Chin interpretation and/or translation, as though Chin is a single language rather than a large group of diverse languages. We observe this not to condemn those who make such requests—they are simply unaware that the community is so diverse and rich in language knowledge. Accordingly, one of CLRP's most basic ongoing goals is to raise awareness that Central Indiana is a language hotspot.

CLRP project choices are driven by student, faculty, and community interests. In March 2020, as the Covid-19 pandemic intensified, Chin student team members raised concerns about lack of access to reliable public health information in Chin languages. Like so many others, we pivoted overnight to a focus on Covid-19. CLRP projects paused, prioritizing translation and dissemination of Covid-19 information for Indiana's Chin communities. These efforts are detailed on our website (see footnote 3). We also began LUCAH, a pandemic-related project which brought together CLRP infrastructure with the language documentation and linguistic expertise of our collaborators. LUCAH activities model how fieldwork, outreach, research, service, language documentation, and student empowerment can be vital parts of a collaborative effort.

### CASE STUDY: THE LUCAH PROJECT

LUCAH grew out of a partnership between CLRP team members in Indiana and faculty researchers from UNT (Shobhana Chelliah, Sara Champlin) and CSFU (Kenneth Van Bik). These partners have brought concerns of documentary linguistics, public health information dissemination, and experience with Chin languages to the CLRP's

community-engaged translation work and language research in an effort to address issues of language and public health raised by the pandemic. The unprecedented circumstances of Covid-19 have meant that health, wellness, and risk prevention/management are, for the moment, front and center in peoples' minds. The pandemic has again demonstrated that access to health information is not equitable for everyone in the United States. There are 7000 or more languages on the planet. Creating accurate and understandable information resources about a novel virus is a tall order in a single language, let alone thousands. Adding to this challenge is the fact that we very often fail to understand the specific cultural practices and beliefs that influence how people process and engage with health information. These issues are at the heart of the LUCAH project, informing the design of our objectives and methodology and characterizing our intentions for the project's contributions and outcomes.

LUCAH has twin objectives: (1) to improve community health outcomes by gaining insight into how members of the Indianapolis Chin community access, engage with, and interpret public health information and services, and (2) to create a unique corpus of richly detailed linguistic information in the form of conversational interviews. These objectives arise from our collective experiences and from the special circumstances that inform our project. First, while translation of written public health information materials has been a goal of many organizations during the pandemic, the same visual information is often used across cultures and languages, ignoring the differences in lived experiences and perceptions held by different groups while diluting or obscuring intended messages. Our work will contribute to the design of culturally tailored visual health messages. Conversations about public health are rarely collected in language documentation projects, but they are a natural topic to pursue now because speakers of all languages are navigating a global pandemic. We aim to increase our understanding of Chin perceptions of health and health literacy while contributing broadly to the development of best practices for health messaging during public health emergencies. The conversational data gathered in our interviews also serve as a productive resource from which we can develop a corpus that will allow us to learn *about* Hakha Lai *in* Hakha Lai and support future community-based linguistic research.

We have adopted a number of novel methodological approaches to ensure that the project makes both practical (Objective 1) and scholarly (Objective 2) contributions. In this project, undergraduate CLRP team

members, who are native speakers of Hakha Lai, play the key roles of conducting interviews and processing interview data. We gather information through conversational-style interviews rather than surveys and questionnaires. That information is transcribed and translated by native-speaker team members, meaning that we can privilege the language of interviewees. We've learned through other linguistic work that much can be lost in translation when a bridge language such as English is used for interviews (Everett 2001; Flood and Rohloff 2018); interviewers who are from the community or well-known to interviewees get longer, more candid, and more varied responses (Cukor-Avila 2005). Because student training and empowerment always inform our decisions, students are trained in recording, transcribing, translating, archiving, and analyzing the highly emotive connected speech that they themselves collect. We have also developed protocols for collecting data virtually via video calls. Though necessitated by the pandemic, these protocols may widen the scope of future research and be useful in any research settings where in-person interviews are not tenable due to prohibitive travel costs, globally dispersed diaspora communities, or government restrictions such as those imposed after the recent military coup in Burma.

Our methods serve as a model for future community collaboration and research and can be replicated for use with other non-English-speaking groups within the U.S. and internationally. It is useful for people working in any area that intersects with forced migration (public health, education, etc.) to cultivate awareness that *language diversity is the norm, not the exception*. Recall that some Hoosiers do not know that many of our Burmese neighbors are Chin, let alone that the term "Chin" does not refer to a homogenous group, but rather a richly diverse community of dozens of cultures and languages.

Similar diversity can be found all over the world. Who lives in your community? Which languages are spoken, and how can you learn about them? On this point, we cannot overemphasize the importance of our student members. Undergraduate members of many institutions have invaluable linguistic and cultural insight into their own communities, bringing to the table unparalleled knowledge. In research such as LUCAH, they can gain scientific training and experience, influence research project direction, and create rich corpora of information.

We are developing free online resources that offer training in our language documentation methodology, designed for both academic and nonacademic audiences. Project findings and materials, including a corpus

of interlinear glossed texts, will be archived and publicly available at UNT's Computational Resource for South Asian Languages Archive (CoRSAL). By sharing our materials freely, we hope to encourage teams working on other issues to adopt similar methods.

This project serves all four groups of stakeholders identified in Fig. 1 by incorporating the larger needs of the community, using the expertise of academic professionals, involving students in novel research methods, treating students as the crucial research partners they are, and sharing information with local organizations. This model of integrated collaboration helps ensure that our research is meaningful. Student development is woven into *all aspects* of the work. Undergraduate Chin students have gained firsthand experience with the research process, participating in project planning and interview guide development and gaining training in interviewing, transcription, and translation. They have served their own communities by listening to and amplifying the voices of those around them, disseminating *their* information and learning from *their* experiences.

## DISCUSSION AND SUGGESTED READINGS

We are often asked how other undergraduates can become involved in work like ours. To answer this, we again raise the idea of thinking creatively about *knowledge*, *expertise*, and *ability*. Large projects like LUCAH require a team with diverse skills, voices, and experiences. If you are an undergraduate student reading this right now, we invite you to step back and think objectively about your skills—don't think about what you don't know, but rather focus on things that you *do* know and *can* learn. Recognize and value the knowledge of those around you, including language mastery. Be conscious, too, that knowledge is not static—seek to increase your knowledge by listening to those around you.

This is our strongest advice: *be a good listener, pay attention to those around you, and seek to learn new things*. We expand on this below.

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**Be informed.** Students who have experienced forced migration have deep ties to other places. Who lives near you? Who attends your school? Learn about your neighbors and the current events that matter to them. For example, a military coup is occurring in Burma as we write this chapter. The IUB student government recently passed a resolution recognizing and supporting our Burmese students. *How does the diversity in your community present opportunities for challenges to be addressed and for collaborative work to be discovered?*

(continued)



(continued)

**Recognize that language is knowledge.** What languages are represented in your classroom, school, city, and state? Consider this knowledge with regard to college language requirements (e.g., *you must study a foreign language as part of your degree*). Often colleges have an option for fluent speakers of other languages to test out those requirements, thereby saving a tremendous amount of time, money, and energy for students who are already multilingual. This option may not be available for speakers of all languages, however—testing opportunities may exist for more widely spoken languages (e.g., Spanish) but not lesser-known languages (e.g., Hakha Lai). At IUB, we are now able to offer proficiency testing for Hakha Lai, Falam Chin (aka Falam tong), and Burmese, which is very useful for our students. *What rules are in place at your school? Are they equitable? (Hint: need help finding people who can help perform language assessments for specific minoritized languages? Linguists and language specialists at your school or elsewhere can probably help!)*

**Do not tie research support to GPAs.** It is valuable for all of us, faculty and students alike, to consider that numerous factors affect GPAs. Forced migration very often interrupts schooling, and there are challenges inherent in completing education through the medium of a new (perhaps a third or fourth) language. GPAs communicate nothing about students' existing language knowledge, their abilities, or their capacity for research. *Lower GPAs should not preclude involvement in paid research opportunities. To support diversification of the academy and encourage participation of underrepresented groups, we must find ways to make engaging in research financially feasible. Can you identify funding options that are not tied to GPA?*

**Be aware.** Activities sometimes seen as a regular part of college are not feasible for all students, especially unpaid internships and volunteer research assistantships. Students who are supporting themselves and their families cannot engage in unpaid work. For us, this means that faculty members devote regular time to seeking funds to support student team members. Students who want to do linguistic research apply for research support so that they can pay the speakers with whom they work. Language knowledge is valuable; language research is work. The best way to convey this in the U.S. system is by ensuring that language work is seen as a paying job. *Valuing students' time and knowledge means finding ways to pay them for all of their work. We must commit to examining critically how we determine what "counts" as work.*

**Be responsive.** Get engaged with and become informed about the communities around you. Here in Indiana, we find that many people don't know that Burma is a country of many different ethnic groups, let alone that the Chin community contains many different groups speaking varied languages. The best way to combat ignorance is to be present and to learn. Joining community events—when invited—is a crucial part of being a good team member. For example, in non-COVID times the IUB team regularly attends Indianapolis events like the Chin National Day celebrations. These are both fun and educational. Students who are engaged in the community are more engaged in the research. *Find ways to learn about those around you. Becoming informed is one step toward being a better neighbor. Read what you can; pay attention to local newspapers and magazines, which often feature local interest stories. If there are events within the community that are open to the public, attend! If you get invited to such events, take up the offer.*

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**Be an intentional student.** We emphasize the importance of becoming more informed. A practical way to do this is to be an intentional student: actively try to make your schoolwork relevant to your local community. One of our linguistics students taking a history class could choose to study the history of Burma for a final paper, for instance.

*When planning for final projects or term papers, find ways to focus on topics related to the research you are doing or the community with whom you are working. Once your project is done, find other outlets to share your work and spread the word.*

**Form alliances.** Teamwork truly lightens the burden. One of our team members is passionate about developing literacy materials for her native language, Lutuv. A linguistics student has become a key ally, helping to draft books, illustrating, and also engaging with scholarly work on literacy efforts. Their efforts are now shared, and both team members are enlivened by having an ally—a teammate with common interests and objectives.<sup>5</sup> *Find others who also want to get involved, for example, fellow undergraduates or researchers in other disciplines who would be interested in your work. If classmates who have experienced forced migration have projects that they are passionate about, work to be a good listener and learn if there are ways you can support their efforts.*

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We have touched on several topics in this chapter. To learn more about language documentation, see Chelliah (2021), *Why Language Documentation Matters*; for language diversity and endangerment, see Harrison (2010), *The Last Speakers: The Quest to Save the World's Most Endangered languages*; and for public health messaging, see Dutta (2008), *Communicating Health: A Culture-centered Approach*.

Increasingly, people from different age groups and walks of life want to engage in work that feels immediately relevant to the lived experiences of students and community members. Communities of collaboration enable this because they involve a broad range of people who have distinct skills acquired through unique life experiences. We hope that our community inspires others to employ similar methods. This includes prioritizing community voices, addressing community-defined needs, focusing on the language(s) of the community, and recognizing the unique strengths and knowledge held by student members of diaspora communities. With the CLRP and LUCAH, we hope to model and define new ways to mingle language and academic expertise and, in doing so, to address the needs of displaced and marginalized peoples while reinforcing the value of these communities. There is linguistic and cultural wealth all around you. Can you see it?

<sup>5</sup>See books created by Par and Matthews at <https://www.chinlanguages.org/lutuv-literacy>.

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# Learning Together: Exploring Visual and Textual Narration with Students Affected by Forced Migration

*Brittany Murray*

In the summer of 2019, Vassar hosted its New Americans Summer Program. For two weeks, eighteen high school students came together to take academic classes, engage in artistic projects, and explore life on a liberal arts college campus, where they learned about possible courses of study and prepared for higher education. Participants, who had arrived in the United States within the previous two to three years, brought with them knowledge gleaned from Afghanistan, Guatemala, Guinea, Haiti, Honduras, Rwanda, Turkmenistan, and other nations. Participants completed STEM and humanities coursework, experimented with digital storytelling and filmmaking, painted a mural with the help of a guest artist, learned about the college admissions process, and joined social activities on campus as well as weekend field trips.

Launching the program posed productive challenges, requiring us to rethink our pedagogical practice and the space of the campus. The unusual conditions of the summer session, a time when the intricate logistics of the

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academic year are paused, heightened organizers' awareness of campus space; though dining halls, student residences, computer labs, athletic facilities, and outdoor space are always intricately interwoven with the academic mission of the college, the connections were especially salient to the summer program. To coordinate these different elements, new relationships had to be formed across campus. Even before the first participant arrived, a small crew of administrators, faculty, staff, and current Vassar students improvised new working relationships in order to prepare for success. Though college campuses can be spaces that produce and reproduce exclusionary practices, the New Americans Summer Program inspired new ideas about how to orient campus space.

Arriving on campus, students contributed greatly to the momentum of this critical and creative process. Participants arrived with an impressive array of intellectual and artistic strengths, along with sophisticated critiques of policing, racism, sexism, xenophobia, economic inequality, and environmentally unsustainable practices. My contribution to the program began with a daily humanities course, where class discussion flourished, thanks to participants' critical prowess. Once we were in the thick of it, however, our shared commitment meant abandoning assumptions about our usual roles on campus. Everybody pitched in where needed. Classroom instructors may have also mixed paint for a mural, on hot days as well as those with sudden thunderstorms. As a team, the program's organizers—Maria Höhn, John Bradley, Matthew Brill-Carlat, and I—re-examined who we teach, what we teach, and how we teach.

### BEFORE THE PROGRAM

While preparing for the program, my thoughts about migration and the humanities classroom developed through hands-on experience, in community with others. Too often, higher education is divided into compartments, separating scholarly reflection from the work of institution-building and organization, research from teaching, and K-12 from higher education. My preparation for the New Americans Summer Program, however, required me to honor the connections among these activities, rather than to treat them as distinct.

The program benefited from the insights of students and educators at all levels. For instance, New Americans Summer Program organizers worked with high school teachers to identify participants. To this end, Höhn and Bradley visited International High Schools and ENL (English

as a New Language) classrooms in the Bronx, Brooklyn, and Albany; at each school, they connected with educators who specialize in working with students new to the United States in a process that yielded invaluable collaborations. The program was fortunate enough to count among its collaborators Alhassan Susso, a distinguished teacher whose pedagogy is informed by his own arrival, at the age of sixteen, in the United States from The Gambia. These outstanding high school educators helped the program to identify academically strong, multitalented students.

Insights gleaned from the classroom during the regular academic year also shed light upon the special summer session. Dialogue with former and current undergraduate students challenged and deepened my understanding of the dynamics of the liberal arts classroom, and of the role of the humanities in responding to forced migration. One venue for such reflection was the *Lexicon of Forced Migration*, a course developed by the Consortium on Forced Migration, Displacement, and Education, to be coordinated across multiple college campuses.<sup>1</sup> As I taught the course at Vassar College from 2019 to 2020, my thoughts expanded in dialogue with students and guest speakers. (For their part, current and former Vassar students have advanced this conversation through an exciting project, a *Selective Bibliography of Forced Migration*.<sup>2</sup> The bibliography, comprised of open-access sources about forced migration aimed at a general audience, was constructed by Elijah Appelson, Matthew Brill-Carlat, Samantha Cavagnolo, Violet Cenedella, Angie Diaz, Kaiya John, Naima Nader, and Haru Sugishita.) Propelled by student research and classroom discussion, we collectively uncovered a rich tradition of literature, film, visual art, and performance—one which often unsettled facile assumptions about how best to narrate migration.

My humanities approach allows me to highlight the ethical, legal, and political sensitivity of different forms of representation of migration. For instance, documentary photography, if done incautiously, can

<sup>1</sup> Parthiban Muniandy, “Lexicon of Migration: Nations, Borders, and Mobilities,” accessed December 13, 2020, <https://www.europenowjournal.org/2019/03/04/syllabus-lexicon-of-migration-nations-borders-and-mobilities/>.

<sup>2</sup> Elijah Appelson et al., “A Selective Bibliography of Forced Migration: Resources for A New Generation of Discourse,” accessed December 13, 2020, <https://www.europenowjournal.org/2020/10/11/a-selective-bibliography-of-forced-migration-resources-for-a-new-generation-of-discourse/>.

inadvertently reinforce gendered and racialized tropes.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, there are ethical implications of photographing someone at the most vulnerable moment of travel, particularly when such images decontextualize their subject. Furthermore, one must consider the legal implications of disclosing names or personal details, particularly when people are fleeing danger or awaiting decisions about their status.

These considerations should not preclude the act of witnessing and testimony, but they do underscore the importance of artfulness. Writers, photographers, filmmakers, and other artists have been my teachers in this regard. An example of an artful approach to documentation might be Jim Lommasson, whose exhibition, “What We Carried,” presents photographs of items belonging to Iraqi and Syrian refugees resettled in the United States.<sup>4</sup> Each image includes an object with a handwritten message from its owner, who is often only identified by a first name. These images testify and preserve the memory of lives left behind, but not through direct representation of people. The photographer approaches his task obliquely, providing compelling insights into people who are invoked metonymically, through their objects.

To testify, but to testify obliquely. I also find inspiration in artists who accomplish that task through surprising and inventive uses of genre. Authors like Edwidge Danticat (“Without Inspection”) and filmmakers like Mati Diop (*Atlantique*) tell stories deeply rooted in the real experiences of communities affected by migration, but they do it through fantastical tropes like flying, haunting, or phantoms.<sup>5</sup> Both examples—love stories, ghost stories, migration narratives, and more—disrupt assumptions about what the appropriate genre might be to narrate migration. The fantastic elements signal a fidelity to the mysterious and undisclosed, reminding readers and viewers that difficult stories require attention to

<sup>3</sup>Heidi Fehrenbach and Davide Rodogno, “‘A Horrific Photo of a Drowned Syrian Child’: Humanitarian Photography and NGO Media Strategies in Historical Perspective,” *International Review of the Red Cross* 97, no. 900 (2015): 1121–55.

<sup>4</sup>Jim Lommasson, *What We Carried*, May 25, 2019, photography, <https://whatwecarried.com/>.

<sup>5</sup>Edwidge Danticat, “Without Inspection,” *The New Yorker*, May 7, 2018, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/05/14/without-inspection>; Mati Diop, *Atlantique* (*Atlantics*) (Ad Vitam Production, Netflix, Cinéart, The Criterion Collection, 2019).



“what is known, but also to what remains unknown in our very actions and our language.”<sup>6</sup>

Art does not merely document a separate reality; there are moments when narrative intervenes. This is, I think, the most ambitious interpretation of Robert Tally’s argument that narrative is a “spatially symbolic act.”<sup>7</sup> Stories reshape perceptions of space, assert claims to inclusion and exclusion, and sometimes build bonds of solidarity that change the way that space is apportioned. As Brill-Carlat so eloquently put it, the discourse of higher education “access” implies that “the problem of unequal opportunity in the US is a spatial one.”<sup>8</sup> We speak of “barriers” to education erected by institutions. While this spatial imaginary may produce certain blind spots—access to the campus lawn does not alone ameliorate the effects of systemic violence and economic inequality—it also indicates a potent site of intervention.

Stories alone, of course, do not suffice to build solidarity. As the New Americans Summer Program’s organizers would attest, this latter task requires no small amount of fundraising, nurturing networks, tackling logistics, resolving conflicts, and acknowledging mistakes. Nevertheless, the humanities inspire and orient this work to re-imagine communities, beginning with our college campuses.

## DURING THE PROGRAM

Humanities coursework highlighted the transformation of everyday experience into narrative through literary and visual form. A graphic novel, Jérôme Ruillier’s *The Strange*, served as a starting point for discussions that often took unexpected turns.<sup>9</sup> The story follows an anonymous protagonist, an anthropomorphized animal, who flees political persecution in an unnamed place, headed for a faraway city. At his destination, he encounters difficulties such as police violence, xenophobia, and exploitive

<sup>6</sup> Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996, p 4.

<sup>7</sup> Robert Tally, Jr., “On Literary Cartography: Narrative as a Spatially Symbolic Act,” *Nano, New American Notes Online*, no. 1 (January 2011), <https://nanocrit.com/issues/issue1/literary-cartography-narrative-spatially-symbolic-act>.

<sup>8</sup> Matthew Brill-Carlat, “Displaced Students and Higher Education Access: Reflections from Vassar College.” Accessed July 4, 2021. <https://www.europenowjournal.org/2019/10/28/displaced-students-and-higher-education-access-reflections-from-vassar-college/>.

<sup>9</sup> Jérôme Ruillier, *The Strange* (Montreal, Quebec: Drawn & Quarterly, 2018).

landlords. He also encounters kindness, the solidarity of the diasporic community, the courage of activists, and the love of a partner.

The simplicity of the narrative allowed for complexity of interpretation. Translated from the original French, *L'Étrange*, the title layers connotations of foreignness with valences of strangeness, difference, or outsider status. This openness of interpretation spoke to students, who experienced migration not as a separate, abstract experience, but as one intertwined with the strangeness of growing up. Prompted by the novel, students enhanced discussion with observations about learning a new language, moving houses or apartments, fitting in at school, standing up to bullies, identifying future academic and professional goals, and engaging with larger social issues. For students, the fast transition from the norms of a high school classroom to those of a liberal arts campus could be challenging. The humanities classroom provided an opportunity for students to explore within the framework of a seminar-style discussion.

Nuanced attention to the formal qualities of the graphic novel enhanced discussion of the text's social significance. Ruillier's narrative unfolds through deceptively simple sketches in a limited color palette; visible strokes suggest graphite or colored pencils. Characters are drawn as animals—a crow who watches everything from a distance or goldfish neighbors prone to forgetfulness. The class mused about why the artist eschewed realism in favor of abstracted or iconic images. Can the abstracted images and spare narrative details, we asked as a class, make the narrative more inclusive? Does it allow people with varied experiences to recognize themselves in the graphic novel?

Together, we explored the possibility of building communities of support while honoring the irreducible differences that mark each individual experience. We were inspired by Ruillier, whose unique working method begins by compiling interviews and testimony, which are later distilled into a fictional story. The result is something grounded in social reality and sensitive to the community depicted, yet open and spacious enough to support the diverse stories with which readers come to the material. Linguistic difference, for instance, is preserved in the text; speech bubbles host misunderstood language represented as symbols. The device reminds the reader of the practical challenges of moving someplace new, while at the same time invoking the fundamental strangeness of another person, and the fragility of communication.

Ruillier's strategy recasts a reality taken for granted. The novel invited the class to think critically about everyday space, as the protagonist's

journey reminded us that places like airports, buses, and crowded sidewalks mean different things to different people; they can be so familiar as to be nearly invisible to the initiated, or for newcomers like our novel's protagonist, they can puzzle or threaten.

Skills honed during class discussion prepared students to engage critically and creatively with Ruillier's text. Students drew and presented their own final panel for the graphic novel's ending. These panels reflected both their toolbox of storytelling tricks and their political outlook for the future. In some stories, the migrant repatriates happily, in others, sorrowfully; in some, he remains in his new country under increasingly hostile conditions; in others, the creativity of migrants and activists transforms society for the better. Reflecting on the text long after the program ended, some students shared their unresolved questions with the author, who generously responded in a written interview published in *EuropeNow*.<sup>10</sup>

Experiments with filmmaking deepened knowledge gleaned from the graphic novel while introducing students to the storytelling possibilities unique to cinema. One day during my humanities course, filmmaker Jan Müller taught a segment on filming dialogue. Enthusiastic about a hands-on opportunity to apply their knowledge, some students tried their hand behind the camera, while their peers discovered hidden talents in front of the camera. This knowledge of filmmaking proved useful later, when Müller guided participants in making a film about their experience. Müller's film, [available here](#), includes information about the program, interviews conducted between two participants, and footage of the mural, discussed below.

Fortified with newfound knowledge of filming, participants then explored film editing. In a campus computer lab, guided by Vassar libraries' academic computing experts, students explored the intersection of technology and storytelling. Students edited digital narratives combining still images with music and voice-over narration that they wrote and recorded. The topic, a food with special familial significance, inspired affecting autobiographical stories. During a final screening, participants, faculty, and counselors had the pleasure of celebrating students' technical skills while learning more about the cultural and familial significance of

<sup>10</sup>Brittany Murray and Jérôme Ruillier, "Foreign, Strange, Singular, Exceptional: An Interview with Jérôme Ruillier," *EuropeNow*, no. 30, accessed December 13, 2020, <https://www.europenowjournal.org/2019/10/28/foreign-strange-singular-exceptional-an-interview-with-gerome-ruillier/>.

each participants' favorite dish. Art and technology came together through this digital storytelling project.

Participants enacted one more storytelling project, and an ambitious one at that. Students painted a mural with the help of street artist and educator Joel Bergner, who also goes by the name Joel Artista. Bergner and his organization, Artolution, have completed community-based mural projects in Brooklyn, Syria, Brazil, and Uganda.<sup>11</sup> At Vassar College, the artist introduced the process with a brainstorming session. Inspired by the mural's eventual location at Vassar Farms, participants knew that they wanted to touch upon food, agriculture, and ecology. At the brainstorming sessions, this goal intersected with many other passions—students thought about social issues like racism, gender, migration, poverty, and climate change, and they thought about shared passions like music, sports, and family. With Artista's leadership, students then painted the mural on the side of the barn.



The mural is an example of how narrative can reshape our understanding of a place, opening the imagination to new possibilities. Stories became

<sup>11</sup> Joel Artista, "World Refugees Paint Their Journey," Global Projects Blog, accessed December 13, 2020, <https://joelartista.com/blog-2/>.

a vehicle for academic learning, artistic expression, socializing, and rethinking how we relate to campus space. The mural is at the Environmental Cooperative at the Vassar barns, a hub of activity where different communities come together through agriculture. Residents of the city of Poughkeepsie might catch a glimpse of the mural on their way to their garden allotments, or members of the CSA may see it when they come to pick up produce. Quite a few motorists and cyclists wandered over for a peek and a conversation with the young artists simply because the mural caught their eye from a busy city road nearby. Bringing together the campus, the city, and our guests, the mural served as a reminder of how art can change the way one looks at a space, while strengthening bonds of cooperation and solidarity.

### AFTER THE PROGRAM

As the team assessed outcomes after the New Americans Summer Program session, it was clear that the program resulted in many successes, while calling attention to challenges and new directions. One lesson learned was the value of centering participant knowledges. The participants were a multilingual, multitalented group with significant life experience. Singers, dancers, poets, photographers, athletes, and scholars—the group brought a range of talents to campus. I joined a team tasked with preparing the ground for their creativity, yet it was ultimately the strength of the students that drove the program's success.

The collaborative structure of the program represented another great asset. The program succeeded, thanks to the efforts of many people. The organizers, John Bradley and Maria Höhn, initiated the project and brought us together. Matthew Brill-Carlat coordinated multiple aspects of the program, taking charge of many of the program's residential, social, and logistical challenges. A team of counselors led by Brill-Carlat included four current Vassar College students, one recent graduate, and a rising first-year college student eager to share lessons learned from her own recent transition to the United States from Afghanistan. Müller and Bergner shared their artistic talents. Hudson Gould and I taught academic courses. Countless other library and staff members helped to make the program a positive experience during the summer, when normal campus activities are suspended. Members of the community baked treats, provided opportunities for worship to students with religious commitments,

and shared their own stories of migration. The new relationships forged through this collaboration reaped unexpected benefits from the project.

The experience nevertheless indicated many opportunities for growth. One area for consideration is how to best preserve and strengthen relationships after the end of such a program. The program's aim was to introduce participants to liberal arts colleges—and the many academic disciplines represented there—as well as to help them prepare for success at whichever higher education institution they chose. Relationships were vital to achieving this end. Participants remained in touch digitally and even organized in-person meetups before the pandemic. My colleagues and I wrote college and scholarship recommendation letters. The student counselors organized virtual sessions for college-bound participants to answer questions and prepare for their upcoming adventure. Similar initiatives might plan even further opportunities for ongoing mentorship and collaboration.

Another question is how best to use technology and digital communication. This concern became particularly urgent during the pandemic, and it is an ongoing goal in light of impediments to transnational mobility. How, for instance, could digital learning, blended coursework, and even transnational classrooms be used to reach participants who may not have the option to travel to a physical campus? How might we implement web-based assignments in a way that enhances the relationships that were the core of our inaugural program?

Finally, it is vital to continue building networks across college and university campuses. A program like this can be expensive and logistically challenging; it can only succeed where there is genuine institutional commitment. Such an endeavor requires considerable material resources. In the past, universities have served as places of refuge; if they are to preserve that tradition, then they might consider committing to financial support.

Stories represent a first step, an opportunity to imagine the world otherwise, including spaces of higher education. Whether we realize that vision is a question of continued effort and collective priorities.

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# Global Cultural Exchange, Women's Leadership, and Advocacy: Connecting the Hudson Valley and the Gaza Strip Through WhatsApp

*Noura Hajjaj*

This chapter details the challenges of mutual digital communication, particularly pressing in light of the geopolitics of the blockade in the Gaza Strip, where conditions are deteriorating and many live below the poverty line. I became acquainted with these challenges through the process of founding and implementing an initiative to connect student refugees in Gaza with undergraduate student interlocutors in the United States. As part of the outreach, participants reflected upon the historical background of the crisis of refugee displacement in the Gaza Strip—the world's third most densely populated territory. Student conversations, via WhatsApp video chats and voice messenger, also forged intercultural bridges and encouraged leadership. The experience in a nontraditional classroom environment promoted student advocacy and enriched the curriculum for both U.S. students and students in Gaza learning about civic engagement.

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In this chapter, I provide a toolkit for educators looking to explore similar opportunities for their students. Between Spring 2017 and Fall 2021, I developed this opportunity and incorporated it into undergraduate courses listed or cross-listed in a variety of departments, including Communication, Political Science, Modern Languages and Cultures, and History. Each course was unique, and, in each iteration, I tailored the exchange experience, which usually represented 25–30 percent of students' final grade, to the specific context of the curriculum. Throughout the semester, students in the U.S.-based course were connected with pre-professional students in Gaza. U.S.-based students took this course for credit, while the students in Gaza participated for enrichment. After describing the goals and outcomes of the exchange, I will identify areas for further development; for instance, though the pilot program focused on undergraduate students who identify as women, my aim is to expand the initiative to include students of all genders. As I show, such partnerships pose significant challenges, even as they offer great benefits to campuses seeking to foster global engagement and student advocacy in the twenty-first century.

#### A DIFFERENT PEDAGOGICAL APPROACH IN SOCIAL JUSTICE: DE-ESCALATION CAN WORK

Through this exchange, undergraduate students in the Hudson Valley, New York, and in the Gaza Strip, Palestine, participated in a global engagement initiative to build intercultural bridges and promote mutual understanding of cultural differences through active listening and empathy in a nontraditional classroom setting. This program was piloted at more than one institution of higher learning in the New York region. Because of the sensitive nature of regional politics in the Middle East, I have elected not to name the institutions in order to protect participating students and ensure future collaborations.

My primary goals were to develop a transformative social justice pedagogy and course delivery, with the aid of WhatsApp; to persuade partners (students and faculty alike) to assess the potential learning outcomes associated with this global engagement; to adapt to the risks associated with computer-mediated communication (CMC) in areas of conflict; and to support women's agency in global contexts.

The effort to foster greater global engagement in academia has been greatly influenced by the theoretical frameworks of cross-cultural communication (Hofstede and Hofstede, 2010; Thomas 1994; Thomas 2006). Such cross-cultural communication is necessary to establish feelings of trust and enable cooperation despite cultural barriers, misunderstandings, prejudice, racism, stereotypes, and conflicts between East and West. Models that incorporate student activism and horizontal relationships can defy preconceived notions about refugees and immigrants (Kim 1998). Despite growing student activism on behalf of migration, refugees, and displacement, critical pedagogy about Palestine remains difficult in the United States. In light of students' desire for community-engaged learning and social activism, it is important to continue sharing successful pedagogical models. I suggest here that using digital communication is indispensable in creating such critical pedagogical practices.

For this purpose, peer conversations via WhatsApp turned out to be a transformative tool for student activism and advocacy. These connections enabled Hudson Valley undergraduates to understand more deeply the nature of the conflict, while building new intercultural bridges between the Gaza Strip and the Hudson Valley. Peer conversations also boosted hope. WhatsApp voice messages served as a key tool for preserving computer-mediated communication (CMC) at times when censorship and surveillance of the Gaza Strip residents prevented planned WhatsApp phone calls and live video calls. The course was built on these interpersonal connections, in a framework of global community-based learning (rather than service learning).

### WHAT IS CHALLENGE2CHANGE?

The goals of my course aligned with the mission of a nongovernmental organization called Challenge2Change. The organization empowers refugee women and young women in areas of conflict across the Middle East, supports their well-being, provides opportunities for both mentorship and leadership, and supports participants as they transform challenges into positive experiences.

Challenge2Change facilitated the recruitment of Gazan undergraduates for this global community-based learning initiative, and I committed to mentoring Gaza-based students for the duration of the exchange. Within twelve hours of setting up the online application, we had received applications from 65 undergraduates from both urban areas and refugee

camps within the Gaza Strip. From this pool, Challenge2Change selected students based on grades (no lower than C) and English proficiency (beginner or intermediate). In the end, the selected student group came from many different academic disciplines and departments: Business, Computer and Information, Engineering, Liberal Arts and Sciences, Medicine, Nursing, and Pharmaceutical. Students made a verbal commitment to the exchange, and they agreed to read news articles in English on the course's assigned topics to prepare for their conversations with U.S. students.

On the U.S. side of the exchange, undergraduate students applied by submitting a resume and participating in video interviews. During these individual interviews, typically 45 minutes long, students were briefed on the nature of the global community-based learning initiative. Participants then had to read an assigned article and later conduct self-directed scholarly research to understand the complicated nature of the project and the living conditions their Gazan counterparts endure. The U.S.-based students who have participated in the exchange have a wide variety of academic interests; the exchange has included students majoring in STEM subjects, such as Mathematics, Computer Science, and Biology as well as humanities and social science majors interested in Communications, Foreign Languages, Political Science, Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, History, Theater, and Music.

This particular exchange was offered as a civic engagement option, one element to enrich courses that explore themes like refugees, migration, and racism. Given the subject's sensitivity, students could opt out of this civic engagement opportunity and instead work with a local community organization, For The Many. For those students who opted into the partnership with Challenge2Change, one of the course expectations was to fundraise \$50 at the end of the semester, in order to enable some of the Palestinian students participating in this project to enroll in English courses taught at AMIDEAST in the Gaza Strip. Each English course and its textbook cost \$150—in an area where the average individual makes \$2 or less per day and child labor is the norm, as reported by the United Nations Children's Fund and the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (Bureau of International Labor 2019).

## INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE AND TENACITY

Our undergraduate students in the Mid-Hudson Valley interacted with young women who pursued their college educations despite disruption from political violence in the Gaza Strip and dire socioeconomic situations. Students connected via video conference, WhatsApp, and social media. At times, students were limited to voice calls only (via WhatsApp) in light of the blockade, which limited access to electricity and Wi-Fi to four hours per day in the Gaza Strip. Another persistent challenge was the seven-hour time difference between New York and Palestine. These practical challenges became the basis for growth. The New York students learned that the dictum that “time is money” that cannot be wasted is a culturally embedded belief, not a universal principle. For their part, the Gazan students had to navigate the program’s tight schedule, despite lacking control over their time in a volatile political situation.

Given the unique circumstances surrounding this civic engagement, all participants were strongly determined to figure out strategies and work around these challenges. Some participants in Gaza borrowed cell phones from relatives, friends, neighbors, and friends of friends. Meanwhile, American students committed to adjusting their schedules as circumstances required. All participants were highly motivated to make these intercultural exchanges a reality. Many participants in Gaza wanted to participate in order to enhance their English language proficiency; practical motivations drove students with goals for professional development or plans for further study. In response to the deteriorating humanitarian conditions in the Gaza Strip, we wanted to reinforce connections between the student refugee population and the outside world.

As Gaza students enhanced their language capacities, American students questioned their assumptions, rethinking the way they perceived accents associated with non-native English speakers. Throughout the process, American students expressed their appreciation of Gazan students, who had minimal prior exposure to English. As a result of the experience, U.S. students developed greater tolerance to support Gazan students’ language learning during interactive sessions.

Through ten virtual meetings over ten weeks, students had intercultural exchanges in English about daily life in both societies. We explored cultural history, religion, politics, travel (freedom of travel vs. restricted

movement), unemployment, healthcare communication and systems, and education. In Spring 2020, we added Covid-19 to the list of topics.

New York participants developed an understanding of what it means to live in an open-air prison, where metaphors of the blockade, siege, trauma, crisis, occupation, terror, and resistance contextualize Gaza's everyday reality (Tawil-Souri and Matar 2016). Gaza has become "unlivable," according to the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Palestinian territories occupied since 1967, who insisted that all parties—particularly Israel—bring an end to this disaster. Eight hundred thousand people drink contaminated water, and two million people navigate a collapsed healthcare system, per the UN report, in a territory with the third-highest population density in the world (Berger and Balousha, 2020). Also, the Israeli series of wars with Hamas led to more severe food insecurity in the Gaza Strip, unemployment at 48 percent, and poverty above 50 percent even before the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic and hostilities during the 11-day war in May 2021 (Abu Amer 2021; Azaiza 2020; Lynk 2018; Macintyre 2019; Schlein 2018; Trew 2019). It is extraordinarily difficult for these young learners to pay for professional development services, such as educational centers or workshops that advance their learning and careers. The class prompted students to identify patterns across borders—connecting, for example, water contamination in Gaza and in Flint, Michigan (Williams 2020). In sum, civic mindfulness empowers individuals to question the dominant power structure and to see how their everyday worries and insecurities are linked to the social and economic contexts of their everyday lives (Purser 2019).

For the New York students, the main purpose was to provide an opportunity for virtual, intercultural exchanges with a population continuously living the norm of internal displacement. They needed to understand the unthinkable magnitude of suffering and the depth of the crisis as a result of Palestinian-Israeli conflict. It is indispensable to listen to stories that are not only unique but also often unpublicized by mainstream media in the United States and Europe.

Self-determination and tenacity empowered interpersonal connections in this virtual setting. Furthermore, the exchange was affirming for students in both locations, supporting participants' sense of agency and galvanizing their engagement with their respective communities on the ground. In their one-on-one interactions and in papers, participants acknowledged each other's strengths and the benefit of a more horizontal exchange of ideas.

## RESILIENCE THROUGH CONNECTION AND EXCHANGE

In addition to academic and cultural learning, an unexpected benefit of the program was a sense of social and emotional support. According to Gazan students, these intercultural exchanges served as an important coping mechanism to support their well-being, even for a short period of time. Before the 11-day Israeli aggression in May 2021, the Gazan students were already terrorized and traumatized from the collective punishment of daily Israeli strikes that go unreported in Western mainstream media. The ten weeks of our sessions offered a temporary escape from the horror of bombardments, a sentiment participants expressed over WhatsApp voice messaging exchanges.

Gazan students were also surprised that their American counterparts were not aware that successive U.S. presidential administrations have provided nearly \$4 billion a year in military aid to Israel. Mid-Hudson Valley students left the course with a nuanced understanding of the United States' role in Gaza. While some expressed their support of past United States policy in the Middle East, they also denounced the consequences of that policy upon residents of Gaza. During one iteration of the class, in Spring 2019, Israeli military aggression in Gaza cut off electricity and Wi-Fi; our class was able to reconvene only after the Gazan students mourned the deaths of family and friends. The New York students expressed authentic concern for their counterparts in the aftermath of the Israeli strikes, and the experience led them to question America's claim to be a global leader in human rights.

The participants found such experiences extremely valuable; both American and Gazan students strengthened their ability to reciprocate different learning experiences, understand cultural differences, and question global issues. De-escalation within these intercultural exchanges is key at times, when participants have challenged one another to think critically about political discourses about the nature of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, the Palestinian diaspora, undocumented immigration, United States foreign policy, cultural hegemony, imperialism, and post-colonization.

## ASSESSMENT RECOMMENDATIONS

By working with young women whose lives are shaped by their families' displacement in Gaza, students based in New York could develop a more concrete sense of the impact of communication, conduct, and the

pragmatic interplay of geopolitics on the livelihoods of civilians and refugees alike in the Gaza Strip. This process of intellectual growth was further cultivated in a rigorous reflection essay that integrated hands-on experiences and civic engagement with communication concepts and theories.

U.S.-based students wrote a reflection paper that briefly described activities undertaken through the project, connected the theme of civic engagement with material covered in the content of the class, and formulated a concrete takeaway about how the experience can be applied to professional and personal goals. Students strove to be specific, concrete, theoretical, and analytical in the final paper. The paper required students to integrate discipline-specific concepts and theories with their hands-on experiences; students wrote about how the experience applied to their current lives and future research trajectories in fields like communication, computer-mediated communication (CMC), refugees, and/or displacement (Kim 1998; Burton 1999).

Finally, the student learning outcomes from this global engagement initiative defied the stereotypical notions of migrants and refugees frequently conveyed by the United States media. Overall, this civic engagement project linked the challenging circumstances of displaced people to uncontrollable political oppression and socioeconomic circumstances. The lack of opportunity in the Gaza Strip was eye-opening to many of the Hudson Valley students, negating the traditional American values of hard work, upward mobility, and individualism. Even the most educated populations and upper-class families in the Gaza Strip nevertheless faced the devastating ramifications of political violence there.

Students' cultural sensitivity increased to develop a further understanding of the humanitarian implications of closed borders and harsher immigration policies. Also, it allowed them to examine contemporary issues of undocumented immigration and forced displacement with more depth and from different perspectives. The project also triggered their interest in exploring in future research the ethical issue of the refugee plight in Gaza from a legal standpoint.

## CONCLUSION

The spread of Covid-19 disrupted our constructs of traditional academic venues, that is, face-to-face classrooms. However, the participants' familiarity with online, community-based global engagement, applied in areas of conflicts, was instrumental in adapting to the sudden shift to remote



learning in March 2020. As founders of this virtual, civic engagement initiative between Hudson Valley undergraduates and stateless college students in Gaza, we set goals to work around warplane bombardments as well as electricity and Wi-Fi shortages in refugee spaces. Drawing upon our existing knowledge of applied intercultural communication competence, student-teacher global activism, and student-centered global advocacy in emergencies, we were able to identify pathways to rethinking the pedagogy of activism and social justice in distance learning. These same strengths aided us in swiftly adapting to a “new normal” during the worldwide pandemic, and now as we enter the post-pandemic world.

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# *Refugees and Forced Migration: An Engaged Humanities Course in French and Francophone Studies*

*Virginia Krause*

In the wake of the election of Donald Trump in 2016 and the anti-migrant hostility he unleashed, I developed an engaged scholarship course in French and Francophone Studies at Brown University. This course grew out of a personal response to this political crisis, drawing me away from my research specialization in early modern France to the here and now. I did not set out to offer a course on French policies of asylum or immigration, a subject taught at Brown in other departments and beyond my expertise; nor did I set out to study immigration in France, frequently taught in my department and others across the United States—a subject, to be sure, with its own urgency given decades of anti-immigrant vitriol on the French right.

Rather, I wanted to work with members of the Providence community who had themselves experienced displacement and who had ties to the Francophone world. I hoped to give students an opportunity to engage on a very local, interpersonal level while studying influential writers and

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theorists from the French tradition (Camus, Derrida, Djébar, and Agier) in a seminar format. The intended audience consisted of students with advanced proficiency in French as well as training in the Humanities and who were therefore prepared to read, interpret, and discuss works of cultural theory in French.

This resulted in a course on *Refugees and Forced Migration* offered through French and Francophone Studies, conceived with a broad Humanities frame (drawing on literary studies, history, philosophy, film studies, and anthropology) and grounded in a community partnership with Women's Refugee Care (WRC), an NGO devoted to supporting African refugees resettled in Rhode Island. Now in its fifth year, this course remains very much a partnership: it relies on the charisma and determination of WRC's two directors, Aline Binyungu and Clément Shabani, and on the extraordinary talent and initiative students bring to the course. It has come to function as a bridge between Brown students and Central Africans recently resettled in Providence, bringing together two communities that would otherwise remain separate.

As the following discussion shows, this project comes with its own challenges. In the first place, students' time commitments, with tight schedules dictated by the university calendar, make it difficult to establish longer-term relationships with members of the community. Moreover, these relationships are also vulnerable to breakage and therefore require vigilant, imaginative work to sustain reciprocity. Finally, unlike the other Humanities courses I have offered in the past, this course has a real-world grounding that can sometimes surface in painful ways, as when a woman in the community who was seeking divorce was murdered by her husband the first year the course was offered. Taking to heart this volume's commitment to offering a toolkit for student-centered initiatives and community engagement, the following pages relate how the vital partnership on which this course now relies was built, before discussing its structure and several key notions that have emerged.

### POINTS OF DEPARTURE

When I set out to design this course, I had no previous experience with community-engaged courses. Nor did I possess any scholarly expertise in the emerging field of forced migration. (May this full disclosure be taken as an invitation to others who might wish to develop such a course!) During the preceding summer, I worked with an undergraduate student

supported by a summer grant from the university to explore possible course designs, which entailed both reading broadly on the subject of migration and displacement and reaching out to social workers and others engaged with the refugee community in Providence. The most fruitful of our initial exploratory meetings was with the director of community outreach at Dorcas International Institute, a very large organization that provides essential services to immigrant and refugee communities in Rhode Island. Their program encompasses all aspects of life, from resettlement and citizenship applications to medical services, housing, and ESL.

Through Dorcas' community outreach director, I learned about Women's Refugee Care, a smaller organization, recently created to serve the community of African refugees in Providence by two members of this community who were themselves recently resettled in Providence. Clément Shabani and Aline Binyungu (married), both social workers from the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), were forced to flee their country in 2006, escaping first to Rwanda and then to Thailand, where they spent seven years in a refugee camp. Their youngest son was born in this camp, where conditions were extremely difficult. They arrived in Providence having both been educated (it remains unusual for women in the DRC to receive a formal education), speaking fluent French but very little English, and with considerable experience as social workers which they sought to bring to bear on their new circumstances.<sup>1</sup> As the name they chose for their organization suggests, the directors of Women's Refugee Care have a deep commitment to women's rights, begun years ago when they focused on empowering women and girls in rural communities of the Democratic Republic of Congo—a segment of the population that lacks basic rights and is, as a result, highly vulnerable. They continue to advocate for women through their work in Providence today, which ranges from support for women seeking employment (application and interview preparation) to child care as well as weekly meetings of the women's group. Perhaps even more vital, however, is the

<sup>1</sup>Women Refugee Care's website describes the organization's mission in the following terms: "In 2016, Aline and Clement saw the impact they could have on the refugee community and thus founded 'Women's Refugee Care' (WRC) a non-profit organization to help them expand the services they were providing to the refugees. Today WRC goes beyond meeting families at the airport and providing cultural food, and now provides clothing to the families, conducts regular home visits to ensure the families are adjusting well and locating the services they need to create their new life in the U.S." <https://www.womensrefugeecare.org/about-us>; consulted January 13, 2021.

informal support they provide in a myriad of ways, making their office a hub for the community.

In the initial conversations I had with Binyungu, we looked for ways Brown students could contribute to the lives of the families in their community and arrived at a list of projects that now lie at the heart of the course. The roughly twenty students each take part in a small-group project pursued throughout the semester (and sometimes beyond) in conjunction with the activities of WRC. These small-group projects include tutoring young children, organizing weekend activities for the youth group, participating in the weekly meetings of the women's group, providing office support, organizing fundraisers on campus (including a Congolese dance performance by WRC's youth group in 2018), and creating documentary videos and other materials for the website. The first semester the seminar was offered, several particularly talented students from Film Studies created WRC's informational video, consisting of an interview with Binyungu that has remained on the website ever since.<sup>2</sup>

The community engagement in this course is thus rooted in the small-group projects, which operate semi-autonomously throughout the semester. Each group offers regular (weekly) updates to the entire seminar, discussing projects under way and bringing to the group difficulties as they emerge. These exchanges also offer an occasion to seek advice (soliciting ideas for a fundraising event on campus or suggestions for tutoring a teenager in difficulty, for instance). Needless to say, this course requires considerable independence and maturity from students, and those who take the course are self-selecting. The course would not be possible without the talent, initiative, and commitment the students bring to it. Nor would it be viable without the mentoring provided by the directors of WRC, who spontaneously adopt a teacherly role with students in addition to their strong, sustaining presence within their community.

In one instance, we witnessed the need for the culturally sensitive support that WRC is able to offer within this community, a need that goes well beyond material concerns such as the winter coats and school supplies that WRC regularly provides. In this instance, tragedy struck one of the families in the community when a Congolese woman initiating divorce was murdered by her husband, who left the body hidden in the closet of the house where she lived with their children. None of the students in the seminar was working with the family in question. Nevertheless, it was a

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.womensrefugeecare.org/about-us>.

traumatic event for the community at large. After the funeral, members of the community gathered for a meal and memorial service, which I attended along with some students from the course. As pastors and male members of the community took the floor, their comments were less focused on the tragedy inflicted on a woman in the community than on challenges for their more traditional family structures posed by living in the United States, where divorce is common and where the husband is not guaranteed the same privileges as head of the family. It was shocking for my students (and for me) to hear the blame for this murder being shifted from the husband's actions to American cultural values. Observing this event brought home how central a role WRC plays in the community given the directors' experience with gender issues and commitment to women's rights along with the privilege of being themselves cultural insiders. The events of this semester were also a sobering reminder that, out of the millions of people seeking asylum, for those who are lucky enough to obtain this endangered status, resettlement is not a happy end, but rather a new chapter in the struggle.

### SYLLABUS

Alongside the ongoing projects taking place in small groups, students in the seminar follow a syllabus that begins with a brief survey of forms of migration and its corollaries (exile, immigration, displacement, errancy) followed by a closer focus on the history of political asylum drawing on the work of the French historian Gérard Noiriel (*Réfugiés et sans papiers*, 1991), supplemented by lectures in class (all in French). The next part of the course features invited speakers who address the contemporary political context in the United States as well as the circumstances that brought refugees from Central Africa to the United States. Among those speakers was Emily Gogolak, a former student who is now a journalist working on migration issues, and Binyungu and Shabani, who offer a guest lecture relating their own story of persecution and displacement while describing the challenges families in their community face. The remaining class meetings are devoted to three topics. We first examine postcolonial contexts in Africa, reading the work of Albert Camus and Assia Djebar. We then turn to the experience of displacement and being undocumented through four films: Georges Perec's essayistic documentary, *Ellis Island* (1980); Yamina Benguigui's documentary based solely on interviews, *Mémoires d'immigrés* (1997); Luc and Jean-Pierre Dardenne's *La Promesse* (1996); and Nadine



Labaki's *Capharnaïm* (2018). Finally, alongside our primary corpus, we examine the work of several theorists: Hannah Arendt's "We Refugees" (1943), Jacques Derrida's *On Hospitality* (1997), and *Les Migrants et nous* (2016) by Michel Agier, an influential French ethnologist who studies the contemporary phenomenon of migration and borderlands. Course discussions often place a theoretical work alongside a film or literary text. This final section will examine two such pairings.

### ON HOSPITALITY: CAMUS (AND DERRIDA)

Practices of political asylum are rooted in ancient notions of hospitality as well as in political and legal institutions and religious traditions, for the ethical imperative of hospitality is present in historical Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, as well as in Ancient Greece and Rome. Long before the modern bureaucratic state claimed the right to police movement across borders or grant asylum to foreigners, the gods extended their protection to foreigners seeking hospitality or to places of sanctuary for those in need. Jacques Derrida examines the cultural and ethical ideal of hospitality, detecting an underlying ambivalence between the term *hostis* ("enemy") and *hospes* ("guest" or "host"). Derrida forges the term *hostipitality* (merging "hostility" with "hospitality") to convey this foundational ambivalence, for when the foreigner is welcomed as a "guest," there is a latent hostility that can easily transform hosts and guests into enemies. The drama of *hostipitality* plays out over and over, Derrida suggests, not because of historical contingencies, but because of this foundational ambivalence.

With this analysis in mind, I invite students to observe the logic of *hostipitality* at work in Albert Camus's short story *L'hôte* (which could be translated as "The host" or "The guest") in *L'Exil et le royaume* (*Exiles and the Kingdom*, 1957). This story's protagonist is a man named Daru, a French-Algerian elementary school teacher living in a remote region of Algeria on the eve of the war for independence. When Daru is called upon to transport an Arab arrested for having murdered his cousin to the colonial authorities, he first offers him hospitality in his home, thereby treating his "prisoner" as a "guest." Daru respects the ritual of hospitality to the letter, offering his guest everything he might need: a comfortable bed, a shared meal, and even the means to escape rather than to submit to the authorities. And yet, all the while, Daru views his guest with a latent hostility, justified first in the name of the man's crime and then by his unwillingness to take the opportunity for freedom that Daru offers him. His

solidarity with this man in the name of an ethical code of hospitality and a philosophical ideal of freedom is fraught, compromised, and ultimately sabotaged. When he returns home, Daru is, moreover, greeted with a threat as someone has written on the blackboard of his classroom, “you turned in our brother” (Daru did not in fact escort the man to the police, but rather placed him at the crossroads of a choice between escaping to live with the nomads or turning himself in), followed by an ominous “you will pay.” The last image is of Daru gazing into the hostile landscape he called home, an allegory of the plight of the *pieds noirs*.<sup>3</sup> Derrida’s notion of *hostipitality* casts a somber light on the ideal of hospitality, which is seemingly always already sabotaged, ready to collapse into hostility.

Evoking Derrida on hospitality thus leads, as one might have predicted, to an impasse. In contrast, Michel Agier, a French anthropologist and theorist of contemporary migration, explores how a bond of solidarity might be formed between a host and a guest (or, as he phrases it, between an “established person” and a “migrant”).

### ON FORGING THE BONDS OF SOLIDARITY: *LA PROMESSE* (AND AGIER)

Set in the world of undocumented labor exploitation, *La Promesse* (*The Promise*, 1996), a film of social realism by the Dardenne brothers, tells the story of a young Belgian boy named Igor, whose father runs a construction business based on the exploitation of undocumented migrants. Igor is being groomed to follow in his father’s footsteps, but this pattern of social reproduction is interrupted when he forges an unlikely bond of solidarity with an undocumented African woman. Michel Agier’s *Les Migrants et nous* (*Migrants and Us*, 2016) elucidates the nature of this solidarity, as well as its limits.

A small book that seems almost tailor-made to our seminar, Agier’s *Les Migrants et nous* begins with a preface devoted to what was commonly presented in the press as “the refugee crisis.” (In the United States at this time, Trump was undertaking his campaign to build border walls and turn away or imprison asylum seekers.) Yet Agier’s book is not devoted to denouncing nativism. Rather, Agier speaks directly to “us”—the “insiders” or the “established” who wish to act in solidarity with migrants—examining three motivations that inspire “the established” to help

<sup>3</sup> *Pied noir* designates a French person born in Algeria before independence.

migrants: suffering, identity, and difference. Agier's analysis of each of these motivations draws on the work of the French sociologist Marcel Mauss and, more specifically, on his notion of the reciprocity of gift-giving as the basis of all social relationships developed in *The Gift (Essais sur le don, 1923–1924)*. Seminar discussion begins by examining Igor's motivations in *La Promesse* before extending Agier's model to ourselves, for the ethnologist's critique hits close to home for the participants in the seminar whose motivations might, indeed, coincide with what Agier terms the three "causes." Since I, too, am implicated by Agier's critique, I can use myself as an example, asking the following: What lies behind my wish to help the community of Central African refugees in Providence?

Perhaps I am moved by their foreignness, coming from a life so far removed from my own. The problem with this motivation "in the name of difference," which Agier terms "the exotic cause," is precisely that it implies a separation, imposing distance while flirting with an aestheticization of the other.

Perhaps I am instead motivated by a similarity between their story and my own. Insofar as my mother left her home to make a life in a faraway (and sometimes hostile) land, displacement is part of my own self-narrative. A common refrain with a certain poetic truth embraced by activists defending asylum seekers is, indeed, "we are all the children of refugees." The problem with this "common identity cause," Agier reminds us, is that it is an effacement of the other, on whom I project my own desires.

Finally, Agier's most piercing critique is reserved for what he terms "the humanitarian cause" which justifies helping migrants in the name of their suffering. We are still haunted by the stories of refugees piled into rafts attempting to escape impossible conditions at home and by the 2015 photograph of the body of a Syrian toddler, Aylan Kurdi, washed up on a Turkish beach. Each of the families in the WRC community has experienced tragedy, and often violence. This experience was indeed the basis for their applications for asylum, the DRC being a country devastated by civil war. But if we (the students, the professor) arrive, moved by the stories of suffering, with the hope of "helping" through our humanitarianism, we are by this very gesture forestalling a true relationship. The charitable gift, Agier argues through Mauss, leaves no room for reciprocity. It implies the absence and the silence of the other, reduced to "receiving" but prevented from "giving." This is not only potentially humiliating; it is also an obstacle to forging a social relationship and to building solidarity. Here, I offer a story from the first year the seminar was offered, when the Directors of

WRC shared with me a problem that had arisen: some of the students tutoring in the homes of families had offended these families when they declined refreshments. Refusing a glass of orange juice and some peanuts might seem trivial, but, in effect, this was perceived as a humiliating refusal of the gift that was being offered to them. This refusal reduced the relationship to humanitarianism, intercepting the gesture of hospitality that sought to introduce reciprocity. This Maussian lesson has direct bearing on students' projects, challenging them to find ways to close the circle of hospitality by receiving what might be offered in a spirit of generosity. Potential gifts are not restricted to material offerings (refreshments, for instance), but rather include the talents, skills, and expertise (Swahili language, cooking, dance) that might be shared in the context of a tutoring lesson, a community gathering, or a meeting of the women's group.

#### AFTERWORD

*Refugees and Forced Migration* represents for me an experiment I never imagined myself attempting. In the first place, it pulled me out of my research specialization built over some 30 years while introducing me to community-engaged teaching, requiring me to stretch and grow as best I can. But it is also experimental in its design insofar as it brings together the study of classics of the French intellectual tradition with community service in Providence. Needless to say, Jacques Derrida, Albert Camus, and Assia Djebar do not offer a user's manual for "community service"—indeed, in the case of the former, deconstruction has been attacked for being disconnected from social and political engagement. It is in any case safe to assume that such figures rarely find themselves on the syllabi of community-engaged courses. To be sure, they offer no guidance directly applicable to students' community projects—which must then be sought in other ways when circumstances arise. At the same time, reading such works in the context of community engagement represents a "challenge" in the best possible sense, for it promotes an attitude of self-reflection and self-critique, a wariness that is a salutary corrective to uncritical "dogoodism." The French intellectual tradition's embrace of negativity—of suggesting, for instance, the "hostility" always potentially lurking within hospitality (Derrida) or uncovering the failure of "humanitarianism" to offer a satisfactory response to forced migration (Agier)—thus has its own virtues, *especially* in a community engagement course.

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PART II

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Law and Policy in Action



# Education Can't Wait for LGBTIQ Refugees? Exploring Inclusion and Access to Higher Education in Kakuma Refugee Camp

*Djemila Carron and Paul O'Keeffe*

## INTRODUCTION

Higher education in refugee contexts has, in recent years, emerged as a key humanitarian response and development imperative within the international forced migration management space (ECRE 2016). Humanitarian organizations and authorities active in the global forced migration management system have, to varying degrees, instituted and facilitated access to higher education opportunities for many refugees within the confines of refugee camps or the close proximity of host communities (Ferede 2018). Under the broad, sometimes vague, guidance of global development initiatives such as the sustainable development goals (Sawadogo 2016), the *raison d'être* of higher education has been positioned as an

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enabling tool for the economic, social and emotional empowerment of refugees (Brugha and Hollow 2017).

Enabling access to, and reaping the benefits of, higher education in refugee camps, while not an easy task for any refugee, is, for the most part, out of reach for the most vulnerable ones who experience multiple and often intersecting layers of discrimination (Walton et al. 2020). The lesbian, gay, transgender, intersex, and queer (LGBTIQ) “community”<sup>1</sup> in Kakuma refugee camp is the case in point. LGBTIQ refugees and asylum seekers have a long experience of discrimination in Kakuma refugee camp (Zomorodi 2016; NGLHRC 2016), where the authors have been running higher education courses for the last five years. Even though Kenya is the only country in the region to permit asylum seekers to be recognized as refugees on the basis of their sexual orientation and gender identity, LGBTIQ refugees in Kakuma suffer multiple layers of prejudices from fellow refugees, the host community, national police, and international organizations (Pincock 2020; NGLHRC 2016). In a context where homosexual acts are criminalized (Kenya Penal Code, Section 162 (a) and (c), Section 163, Section 165) and given the severe lack of learning infrastructure (such as adequate learning technology and safe learning spaces) and limited resources, these refugees have very limited access to the few higher education opportunities that other refugees might have.

While higher education has enabled and facilitated various refugee-led community initiatives in Kakuma,<sup>2</sup> because of difficulties in facilitating access and lack of inclusive approaches, these opportunities are still absent for the LGBTIQ “community.” In this article, we explore the realities of access and inclusion in higher education for LGBTIQ refugees and asylum seekers in Kakuma refugee camp and chart a way forward so that higher

<sup>1</sup>We put the word “community” in quotes as in Kakuma, as elsewhere, lesbian, gay, transgender, intersex, and queer people are generally categorised as a homogenous group or “community”. While we understand that this is a contested notion, we use this term as the LGBTIQ people that we spoke to for this article in Kakuma identify as such. To quote one of them: “We are a community and do what we can for each other. Outside of the community, everyone sees us as the same. Lesbian, gay, transgender, we are all bad to them. They don’t care, they hate us.”

<sup>2</sup>Various initiatives have been put in place by our former students in Kakuma—for example, creation of the community-based organization (CBO), African Initiative for Human Development, which focuses on access to digital education for refugees, or the youth club, Vijana Twaweza, that brings together young people from many different communities to raise fish and vegetables and teach others about the importance of nutrition, sustainability, respect and cooperation.

education can empower the “community,” within the confines of their legal and social existence, to build on and from their resources. Through consultation and discussion with LGBTIQ people immersed in the forced migration management system, we relay our assessment of the situation in Kakuma and offer recommendations on how to move forward.

### HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE CAMP

Located in remote, arid northwestern Turkana state, Kakuma refugee camp is home to over 197,341 refugees of around 20 different nationalities (UNHCR 2020). Education opportunities in Kakuma are few, with primary and secondary schools oversubscribed and under-resourced (Mendenhall et al. 2017). Tertiary education opportunities are limited to a handful of places on vocational courses offered by international organizations operating in the camp. University-level courses are even rarer. They are offered by a few local and international universities who operate exclusively or mainly online, and the University of Geneva’s InZone program, which offers blended learning courses at its Kakuma campus.

InZone is an interfaculty programme at the University of Geneva that has offered accredited university courses in Kakuma for the last five years. During this time, InZone has delivered courses in human rights law, ethics, medicine, global health, engineering, economics, and history for over 200 students in the camp. Using a connected, collaborative blended learning ecosystem, students access online courses and participate in face-to-face lessons at a learning facility (the learning hub), which is managed by a team of refugees (O’Keeffe 2020). This “refugee-led model” is central to InZone’s collaborative learning ecosystem (CLE) which enables lecturers and tutors based at the University of Geneva to connect with refugee students both online and face-to-face. The refugee-led management approach also helps refugee students to congregate in the learning hub where they can access the necessary technology to connect with their teachers and participate in peer-to-peer learning with classmates. Using responsible, responsive, and transformative pedagogical approaches, the CLE model has been empirically developed and scientifically validated (O’Keeffe 2020; Carron 2019a, b) to help ensure that refugee students experience optimal student-centred learning conditions even in the restricted nature of higher education in refugee camps.

During our time in Kakuma, we have forged alliances with the various humanitarian and refugee-led organizations and communities present in

the camp and attempted to reinforce local refugee capacity—both technical and human—in our efforts to enable accessible, inclusive higher education. Our management team in Kakuma has the capacity to manage courses for 100+ students per semester at the learning hub. Unfortunately, access to the hub is not possible for all people within the camp. Certain vulnerable communities, such as those with disabilities, or those who face persecution within the camp itself, cannot safely travel to and from the hub, which is located up to 12 kilometers (8 miles) from the barracks where some people live. Furthermore, security and physical safety for some groups cannot be guaranteed at the hub. This is particularly the case for LGBTIQ people, who routinely face persecution in the camp from authorities, the host community, and fellow refugees. Furthermore, within the infrastructure of education provision in the camp, little or no training has been given to students, teachers, facilitators, and administrators about LGBTIQ rights or sensitivities relating to this ‘community’. Finally, in our experience, curriculum developers have given little or no consideration to the consequences of non-LGBTIQ-friendly learning materials.

### LGBTIQ COMMUNITY IN KAKUMA

Over the course of 2018–2020, we have connected with prominent LGBTIQ rights advocates and leaders in Kenya through our academic and advocacy pursuits. Our work in Kakuma refugee camp and our interactions with these leaders and advocates have afforded the opportunity to gain insights into the dynamics of the “community” in Kakuma, the issues that affect their lives and hopes for the future (particularly in the domain of higher education). Refugee Flag Kakuma, a LGBTIQ rights group active in Kakuma, informed us that there are at least 200 self-identified “out” LGBTIQ refugees living in different parts of the camp (May 2018)—mainly coming from Uganda but also the Democratic Republic of Congo, Nigeria, Burundi, Ethiopia and so forth. While some members of the community live in a protected zone in the camp, the majority are dispersed around the sprawling camp.

Fluctuating numbers and frequent violence against LGBTIQ people have often resulted in community leaders demonstrating outside the headquarters of UNHCR in Kakuma (at considerable risk to their personal safety) to plead for UN protection. This has, at times, resulted in UNHCR temporarily removing identified LGBTIQ people from the camp to less immediately dangerous conditions in Nairobi (Bhalla 2019). The 200

LGBTIQ people who self-identify in Kakuma hardly represent the true number.<sup>3</sup> Although some LGBTIQ people are “out” in Kakuma (in particular, activists who have fought hard in their home countries for their rights), the majority are not. While relocation to Nairobi or the goal of being resettled to a Western country may convince some to identify as LGBTIQ, the fear of “coming-out” in Kakuma where being identified as a member of the “community” is a real and present danger prevents many from doing so. This was emphatically expressed to us when we discussed with members of the “community” an inaugural Pride Parade that Refugee Flag Kakuma organized in Kakuma in 2019.<sup>4</sup> We were told that “afterwards attacks increased as the other refugees now knew who was LGBTIQ. We have no recreation, no events, we can’t go and be ourselves in public.”

Currently (during the Covid-19 pandemic), movement in, around and out of the Kakuma camp has been extremely restricted (Carron and O’Keeffe 2020),<sup>5</sup> removing any safety-valve measures, such as relocation to Nairobi, in case more attacks flare up against the “community.” The fear of being identified as LGBTIQ by their fellow refugees in Kakuma has, according to a prominent member of the community, resulted in a “hidden community who cannot be visible.” Being “hidden” comes with the fear of being exposed as LGBTIQ and as such heightens vulnerability for LGBTIQ people in Kakuma, where, according to another member of the community, “There are no safe spaces.” Participating, openly or not, in pursuits like higher education, while it would “give me something to do and allow me to sometimes forget where I am and some skills if I ever

<sup>3</sup>A recent report from the Voice of America on violence against the LGBTIQ community in Kakuma puts the number at 300. UNHCR agrees on the number of people concerned. April Zhu, “Kenya’s LGBTQ Refugees Face Threats, Attacks at Kakuma Camp,” *Voice of America*, August 13, 2020, [www.voanews.com/africa/kenyas-lgbtq-refugees-face-threats--attacks-kakuma-camp](http://www.voanews.com/africa/kenyas-lgbtq-refugees-face-threats--attacks-kakuma-camp); UNHCR, “UNHCR urges dialogue and peaceful coexistence among refugees in Kakuma refugee camp,” *UNHCR Kenya*, July 10, 2020, [www.unhcr.org/ke/18473-unhcr-urges-dialogue-and-peaceful-coexistence-among-refugees-in-kakuma--refugee-camp.html](http://www.unhcr.org/ke/18473-unhcr-urges-dialogue-and-peaceful-coexistence-among-refugees-in-kakuma--refugee-camp.html).

<sup>4</sup>For refugees coming from Uganda, the situation is more complicated as there is no instability in their country of origin. It means that being from Uganda in Kakuma means being affiliated with the LGBTIQ “community” and therefore not getting a chance to find a job, avail of medical services properly or serve in a shop.

<sup>5</sup>The Kenyan government announced various measures to prevent the further spread of coronavirus in 2020. See: [www.unhcr.org/ke/coronavirus-covid-19-update](http://www.unhcr.org/ke/coronavirus-covid-19-update).

leave this place,” may risk being “outed” in the camp, such as happened after the Pride Parade.

As a programme of the University of Geneva, InZone operates under an expectation and duty of being an inclusive, accessible program.<sup>6</sup> A tenet of the programme’s operations is to create safe education spaces for all students regardless of their sexual orientation and/or gender identity, where they can discuss their concerns and develop tools and knowledge to analyse and shape their environment. This goal has not yet been accomplished, given the reality of being LGBTIQ in Kakuma. Speaking to a prominent member of the LGBTIQ “community” during a planning session for improving inclusion and access to our program, we were told that LGBTIQ people “have to keep a low profile—pretend we are not gay. If it is revealed, we could be killed.” Another member of the community told us that “there is a protection problem” in Kakuma. “We are harassed constantly. The host community started stoning us two weeks ago. The police say they cannot help LGBTIQ people because of the laws of Kenya. They tell us to not wear what we wear, even. I am transgender, so I am forced to wear men’s clothes and pretend to be someone I am not. I can’t express myself. When things got bad in Nairobi, I had to come here and suppress myself even more. You can see what I’m wearing (men’s jeans and a t-shirt)—this is not me, this is not who I am.”

### WHAT CAN WE DO?

Any attempt to ensure that LGBTIQ people have the opportunity to safely participate in higher education in Kakuma must start from a deep understanding of the situation in the camp and from the “community” itself (Freire 1970; Adams and Bell 2016). To avoid a neocolonialist approach of what should be done (Freire 1970,) and of identity *per se* (Lee 2018; Murray 2014), the first thing we must do is to talk and listen to the people concerned. This can only be done by making sure they feel safe to share with us what would help them to be comfortable enough to attend our courses if they wish to do so. This is a long process, as mistrust has undermined many relations in the camp (Grayson 2016); further, LGBTIQ refugees and asylum seekers, like many others, have a long history of

<sup>6</sup>See, for instance: [www.unige.ch/actualites/files/2015/2655/9717/Charte\\_de\\_la\\_Diversite-signee-EN.pdf](http://www.unige.ch/actualites/files/2015/2655/9717/Charte_de_la_Diversite-signee-EN.pdf).

participating in surveys and interviews in the forced migration system without seeing concrete improvements in their situation.

According to our first insights from talking to the LGBTIQ community in Kakuma, three main pathways could be available to make higher education spaces there more welcoming and inclusive for LGBTIQ students. One approach is to develop course offerings only for LGBTIQ people in Kakuma by building a physical space in the protected zone where some members of the LGBTIQ community live. To do so would come with many constraints such as getting access to power and reliable Internet (a major concern in Kakuma). Furthermore, such an approach, if following InZone's refugee-led CLE model, would require the creation of a management team capable of running a higher education program and responding to the needs of the higher education organization. Once such a team is established, the education provider would have to adjust their offer to make sure it fits with the needs and wishes of the members of the community.

A second approach, which might not require building a separate physical space, would be to provide community members access to computers and connectivity from their homes. This could be done through technology such as the BeeKee box—a device developed at the University of Geneva that provides access to courses without requiring access to the Internet. This approach, while negating the role of face-to-face and peer-to-peer interaction in learning, would permit LGBTIQ refugees to access courses without having to travel and be in a classroom with fellow students.

These two first “separate education models” have important flaws. First, they do not prevent LGBTIQ refugees from being attacked while learning at home or in their hub. It could even be that some refugees will not understand why the education provider mobilizes specific funding for LGBTIQ people and not for other refugees, who also need access to higher education. This could increase tensions and put LGBTIQ students at further risk. Second, in the long run, this will not improve the situation of LGBTIQ refugees in Kakuma. Refugees can spend more than decades in the camp with little chance to be integrated into Kenyan society, repatriated or resettled in third countries. Moreover, repatriation is the last thing many LGBTIQ refugees want. It is therefore essential to try to build physical and virtual spaces where they can feel that they belong to the broader community, and where mentalities can change.

A third and final approach we would like to put forward is to improve higher education providers' offerings in Kakuma, so that seeking higher

education is safe and relevant for LGBTIQ students. This would require a more considered, holistic approach. It would mean ensuring safe travel to and from learning hubs, protection from harassment in class and online, complaint mechanisms, visible support of anti-discrimination policies in all premises and awareness trainings for education programme management teams on-site and online and for all the people involved in the learning ecosystem. For instance, lecturers and tutors should be aware that there might be LGBTIQ people among their students who require specific, sensitive pedagogical approaches—for example, being aware of how to deal with questions about the morality of homosexuality or trans identity in an ethics class, or with the question of the legality of homosexuality or trans identity in a human rights class, while not being culturally invasive (Freire 1970, 1998). The main flaw of this approach? It requires more resources and, when starting, does not ensure the physical and mental safety of LGBTIQ students in learning hubs. It is nevertheless the only option for programs like ours if we are to respect our own rules when operating abroad, and the only option for LGBTIQ people in Kakuma to study while participating in and changing their own society.

## CONCLUSION

This chapter has laid out our experience of working in Kakuma and attempted to amplify the voices of the LGBTIQ refugees who have put their trust in us as researchers and pedagogues. Echoing those with whom we have spoken, we remain optimistic that higher education can help improve their lives and accelerate progress for refugees worldwide. While no single one of our suggested approaches is a quick fix, we hope that they at least open possibilities to educators to start thinking about solutions.

Regardless of which approach is followed, higher education providers need to take a step farther than opening their doors to LGBTIQ students. To paraphrase Paolo Freire, education is not neutral and can be used either for conformity or freedom (Freire 1970). If we are serious about having LGBTIQ students studying in places like Kakuma, and determined that they feel safe “in” or “out of the closet”, we need to rethink our pedagogy and learning ecosystems. In other words, queer it (Shlasko 2005), while respecting the “now” and “here” of the students and letting them lead the way (Freire 1970). Such an undertaking could draw inspiration from queer theories and pedagogies, especially those developed on the African continent and taking into account other forms of oppression. For instance, lecturers and other people who teach and administer courses could make

sure that queer experiences, in all their diversity, are put at the centre—when, for instance, explaining in class a story with a concrete case (Brooks and Parkes 2004; Petersen 1994). Those teachers and administrators must also take into consideration, analyze, and finally make unwelcome in classes, discriminatory behaviours and speeches against LGBTIQ people (Brooks and Parkes 2004; Petersen 1994; Adams and Bell 2016).

Finally, on a different level, an academic institution that would like to take an inclusive approach to higher education for LGBTIQ refugees and asylum seekers in a place like Kakuma should also be ready to advocate for wider institutional changes. This could mean engaging in discussions with actors on-site, like the UNHCR and its implementing partners, but also the police and local courts, to remind them of their obligations regarding this population. This is a risky approach, as some of those institutions have the power to expel academic institutions from the camp. Nevertheless, one basic principle of queer pedagogy is to embrace activism when necessary, and to take our own risks when people we want to work and learn with are risking their own lives (Hung 2017; Brooks and Parkes 2004).

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# Migration, Death, and Disappearance: Education and Engagement in Tucson, Arizona

*Bruce Anderson and Robin Reineke*

A tragedy has unfolded over the past two decades along the U.S.-Mexico border, where the remains of at least 9000 human beings have been discovered in the desert borderlands since 2000. While migration itself is not a crisis, the loss of life most certainly is. In addition to those who mourn the dead are those who experience the painful ambiguity of loved ones' disappearances. The scale of death and disappearance is vast, both spatially and temporally—the geography is not limited to the U.S.-Mexico borderlands, but also includes the south-to-north migration corridor from Central America to the U.S., where losses have occurred gradually and continually since the early 2000s. Within communities where migration is prevalent, everyone knows of someone who has disappeared *en route*. Sadly, this loss of life will likely continue until Latin American peoples are

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able to immigrate to the U.S. safely and legally. In the meantime, it is important for students to learn about this issue, understand its root causes, and work on solutions.

The authors of this chapter are both educators and practitioners. Dr. Bruce Anderson has been a forensic anthropologist at the Pima County, Arizona, Office of the Medical Examiner since the year 2000, and an instructor and mentor of students of forensic anthropology, mostly at the University of Arizona, since 1999. Beginning in 2006, Dr. Robin Reineke studied under Dr. Anderson for her master's and doctoral degrees. In 2013, she co-founded the Colibrí Center for Human Rights, a nonprofit, nongovernmental organization that supports families of missing migrants along the U.S.-Mexico border through forensics and advocacy. Dr. Reineke directed Colibrí until 2019, and then became a full-time researcher and instructor at the Southwest Center of the University of Arizona.

Our experience as practitioners in the medico-legal field and educators at the university level informs the approach of this chapter, which emphasizes project-based learning, internships, and community engagement. Our interaction with students on this topic has primarily been through teaching an introductory forensic anthropology course at the University of Arizona's School of Anthropology—and through mentoring student interns at the Pima County Office of the Medical Examiner (PCOME) and the Colibrí Center for Human Rights. After describing the background of the problem of deaths and disappearances along the U.S.-Mexico border, we will discuss our approach with students in the classroom, the lab, and, finally, in terms of ethical and equitable engagement overall.

## BACKGROUND

U.S. border and immigration policy has often been violent, inequitable, and inconsistent, especially since 1924, when the Johnson-Reed Act was signed into law. It established numerical quotas limiting the number of immigrants allowed entry by country, following a racial hierarchy heavily influenced by the scientific racism of eugenics (Ngai 2014). The Act prevented immigration from Asia, set quotas on the number of immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe, and provided funding for the newly formed Border Patrol. Importantly, there were no numerical restrictions on immigration from countries of the Western Hemisphere, protecting the agricultural sector's access to Mexican migrant laborers who worked seasonally for low pay (Ngai 2014; Chacon and Davis 2006). The

historian Mae M. Ngai traces how the newly established Border Patrol, founded under the Department of Labor, quickly came to operate as a special police force focused on the repression of Mexican workers (Ngai 2014). While laws like Johnson-Reed guaranteed the availability of workers, violent policing and deportations by the Border Patrol discouraged workers from organizing to demand better working conditions and wages. This dual U.S. process of importing workers while simultaneously criminalizing them would continue for the next hundred years, always using the border as a release-valve for the deportation of surplus laborers (Chacon and Davis 2006) and as a spectacle of control (De Genova 2002).

In 1965, the Hart-Celler Act finally installed quotas for Western Hemisphere nations. Although the law abolished the racist hierarchy of national-origin quotas, it also established a per-country cap of 20,000 quota visas per year (Ngai 2014). Given that in the early 1960s, Mexican migration included some 200,000 *Braceros* (seasonal workers with visas) and another 35,000 admissions for permanent residency, “the transfer of migration to ‘illegal’ form should have surprised no one” (Ngai 2014: 261). Since that time, migrants wishing to work in the U.S. have been compelled to face the dangers of the desert borderlands.

While laws like Hart-Celler legally created “illegal” migration and criminalized migrants, it was changes in border enforcement strategy in the 1990s that made migration deadly. Under President Bill Clinton, the 1994 Border Patrol Strategic Plan—containing stratagems such as Operation Hold the Line, Operation Gatekeeper, and Operation Safeguard—enhanced the presence of border enforcement in urban areas and, in between, harnessing the deadly potential of U.S. Southwestern deserts “in a strategy of prevention through deterrence.” The resulting loss of life was swift and severe, as migrants tried to walk through increasingly remote and arid portions of the borderlands. Migrant deaths first increased in California in the late 1990s before shifting to Arizona, which then saw a more than tenfold increase between 1999 and 2001 (Rubio-Goldsmith et al. 2006). Since 2000, the Pima County Office of the Medical Examiner (PCOME), which covers most of the Arizona portion of the border, has investigated the deaths of a yearly average of 156 individuals recovered from the desert borderlands (Martinez et al. 2021; PCOME Annual Report 2020). Between 1990 and 2020, the PCOME

has examined a total of 3356 cases of remains either known to be, or believed to be, migrants.<sup>1</sup>

In addition to confirmed deaths, there is also the enormous social and scientific problem of disappearance in the desert.<sup>2</sup> Families of the missing spend months or years searching, all the while enduring painful ambiguity and extreme stress (Reineke and Anderson 2016; Crocker et al. 2021). Forensic authorities struggle to identify the dead due to the harsh landscape, the lack of medical and dental records for the missing, and decentralized data scattered throughout the Americas (Anderson and Spradley 2016; Latham and O'Daniel 2018). When families and forensic authorities are able to successfully link the information they each have, unnamed remains can be connected with a missing loved one, and a family can finally begin to mourn and heal. However, many families never get answers, but continue to search for years. Along with these families, forensic scientists, cybersleuths, activists, and humanitarians have been creative in their efforts to find the missing and identify the dead. Students can participate in these efforts in many ways.

### IN THE CLASSROOM

The University of Arizona's School of Anthropology has a long history of educating future anthropologists in all subfields, including forensic anthropology. The late Dr. Walter H. Birkby, a preeminent forensic anthropologist, trained innumerable undergraduate and graduate students in forensic anthropology in both the classroom and the laboratory from the early 1970s through the mid-1990s. Today, students interested in forensic anthropology may take a number of courses, including *Introduction to Forensic Anthropology*. This course, which takes the U.S.-Mexico border as a case study, was devised to teach students a history of the field, an understanding of current methodologies, and an appreciation of how the

<sup>1</sup>Because 1196 of these cases remain unidentified at the time of writing, their status as migrants is predicted rather than known. This prediction is based mostly on the fact that the remains were found in areas known to be migration corridors and seemingly do not match any missing-person reports of U.S. citizens.

<sup>2</sup>Although determining a precise and accurate count for the number of those who have disappeared while crossing the desert borderlands is nearly impossible, two NGOs manage a large amount of data. At the time of writing, the Colibrí Center for Human Rights was managing 3490 active missing person reports, and the Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team 1653.

discipline can be fully integrated into medico-legal death investigation alongside forensic pathology, other forensic sciences, and law enforcement. Especially in the border context, forensic anthropology is *essential* to this medico-legal death investigation because it brings a holistic anthropological perspective to the table. Dr. Anderson previously taught the course; Dr. Reineke became the instructor in 2016. The pedagogical approach to this class follows that of Dr. Birkby, who believed that students learn best by interacting with real skeletal remains and through real-life problem-solving. As taught now, the course has three learning components: hands-on labs with real bones, interaction with guest speakers, and readings that cover not only the basics of forensic anthropology and human osteology, but also the social determinants of health, the causes of migration, and ethics. We will describe some components of the course in detail, to show how project-based learning can link students with communities facing complex challenges.

At the beginning of the semester, students join small groups of 4–5 and are introduced to a semester-long mystery. Each group is provided with a box containing bones (loaned to the School of Anthropology by the PCOME) and various items of clothing and personal effects (purchased at Goodwill). They are given the following mock scenario and challenge: “Law enforcement recently discovered six boxes of bones in the basement of the Anthropology building, and they have asked you all to help them create profiles for each unidentified case.”<sup>3</sup> Each week during the semester, students apply what they have learned about forensic anthropology to unlock clues about the case. They note any personal effects and the condition of remains, establish the minimum number of individuals, and then create a biological profile as they learn how to assess sex, age, stature, and individualization. Throughout the process, they are invited to think like forensic anthropologists and become familiar with the particular strengths and limitations of the field.

A variation of this project-based learning plan was created in 2020, when the class could not meet in person. Using the publicly available online database, NamUs (National Missing and Unidentified Persons System), each student selected a real missing-person case where the person

<sup>3</sup>Such a scenario is sadly all too real. The University of Pennsylvania was embroiled in scandal and shame after a student research group discovered that anthropology faculty members had unethically retained the bones of a child killed in the MOVE bombing incident in Philadelphia for more than 30 years (Kassuto 2021).

was last seen in Arizona. Each week, they learned how to adjust search parameters based on sex, age, date last seen, and identifying features. They were invited to become a sleuth on behalf of that missing person. One student enjoyed using NamUs to search for the missing so much that she created four very strong comparisons between missing persons and unidentified human remains using the system; her comparisons were forwarded to the PCOME. Any classroom in any region could make use of NamUs in a similar way.

While they are learning about forensic anthropology through real bones or cases online, students are exposed to the U.S.-Mexico border context as a case study, with supplemental readings, films, podcasts, and guest speakers. Guest speakers join the classroom from the PCOME, the Colibrí Center for Human Rights, and from among families searching for a missing loved one on the border. While it is best practice to financially compensate guest speakers for their time and expertise, this is not always possible. The instructor is careful to make sure that guest speakers are actively interested in speaking with students and feel that they get something out of the experience. We have found that PCOME forensic anthropologists appreciate their time with students and benefit from the opportunity to share information about internships with our classes. Every year, at least one student from the class becomes an intern, inspired by the work of the guest speaker. Families of the missing who have spoken with students share that it is meaningful for them to talk about their missing loved one and to feel that their experience is important enough to be heard in a university classroom. Students report that hearing from guest speakers is their favorite part of the class, and that having the opportunity to meet forensic practitioners and families of the missing is powerful.

Finally, the readings that students complete for the class include both a traditional forensic anthropology textbook (Christensen et al. 2019) along with anthropology journal articles that approach the social science of migration, health, and forensics. These supplemental readings cover structural violence (Farmer 2004; Quesada et al. 2011), the social determinants of health (Castañeda et al. 2015; Gravlee 2009), the embodiment of poverty (Goodman 2013; Beatrice and Soler 2016), controversies surrounding anthropological assessments of race and ancestry (Sauer 1992; Caspari 2003; DiGangi and Bethard 2021), the history of migrant deaths along the U.S.-Mexico border (Reineke and Anderson 2016; Latham and O'Daniel 2018), and the social distribution of injury, trauma, and death (Kimmerle et al. 2010; Howarth 2007; Hughes et al. 2017). Discussions



of these readings enhance the students' forensic inquiry to include socio-structural factors as part of the "mystery" to be solved. A forensic, scientific, curious, and empathetic lens is encouraged—not just as a way to view skeletons, but as a way of seeing the world.

### IN THE LAB

Beginning in 2004, the PCOME created an Internship in Forensic Anthropology in partnership with the School of Anthropology at the University of Arizona. This internship was devised to provide hands-on exposure to forensic anthropology examinations in an effort to allow the student to assess whether this field offered a course of study they might want to pursue. Both undergraduate and graduate students have been invited to apply, with usually one but sometimes two students accepted per semester. While the first internship was originally restricted to University of Arizona anthropology students, gradually students from other universities have been allowed to take part. From the perspective of the PCOME, the most rewarding outcome of the internship has been when undergraduate students go on to enroll in a graduate program to pursue training as forensic anthropologists.

In addition to the internship at the PCOME, the Colibrí Center for Human Rights has accepted volunteers to become a part of the team through semester-long internships. College interns can join Colibrí in the fall, spring, or summer, where they work closely with staff on a particular project, usually relating to finding creative new ways to communicate about the problem of death and disappearance in the borderlands. Colibrí interns have gone on to get degrees in Latin American Studies, Forensic Anthropology, Public Policy, and Sociology.

### ETHICS, EMPATHY, AND EQUITY

Through our long-term experience with this issue, having spent countless hours trying to identify the dead and working to inform the public and policy-makers alike about the true costs of U.S. border policy, we have come to understand that the problem we face is not one of science, but one of empathy. As the border and migrants gradually came to be constructed as threats in the minds of many Americans, our collective ability to recognize human suffering through the noise of fear-mongering and scapegoating has weakened. While teaching, we invite students to practice

empathy and ethical engagement with the stories they encounter, regardless of their political beliefs. For example, one of the first laboratory exercises in the forensic anthropology class asks students to take missing-person reports for each other, placing them in the position of a missing person themselves. Another exercise asks students to fill out a missing-person report for someone they love, thinking through what it would be like to have to recall every detail about a parent or sibling. And, before the boxes of bones are opened, we invite all students to recognize their privilege and responsibility as they begin to handle human remains, which they are encouraged to encounter with respect and care.

Similarly, while working with student interns, PCOME forensic anthropologists teach and demonstrate ethical engagement with human remains and with families. Students are reminded that each case of skeletal remains was once a living person, and respectful laboratory etiquette and decorum are demonstrated at all times. The PCOME treats every case of human remains with the same level of respect and scientific rigor. The risks and benefits of every action taken to examine bones, especially actions that may be destructive, are weighed for their potential impact on the family. Student interns are invited to observe and participate at every step alongside PCOME forensic anthropologists.

While many students will benefit from such an approach, it is critically important to remember that not all students will need to practice empathy, as these issues already hit close to home. Some students may be immigrants themselves, or have close family members who experienced a border crossing. Others may have experienced traumatic loss or the violent death of a loved one. On the first day of the Introduction to Forensic Anthropology class, students are asked to fill out a one-page introduction shared only with the instructor. There, they have an opportunity to share a personal loss or a family experience with migration. This allows the instructor to be mindful of the diversity of experience in the class and provides an entry point for authentic discussion, check-ins, collaborative learning, including, and of course, learning on the part of the instructor.

The pedagogical collective Learning Scientists for Racial Justice has produced helpful tips and guidelines for educators seeking to foster learning environments that are inclusive, equitable, and anti-racist. Of particular relevance to studying migration is their recommendation to avoid expecting more labor in the form of sharing or teaching from students of color, or in this case immigrants, than from non-immigrants in the classroom. Sharing personal experiences can foster community, inclusivity, and dynamic learning, but it can also cause stress that is often unequally

distributed according to social experiences of race, class, and gender. There should always be an option to step back from an assignment or discussion and replace it with something else. Finally, maintaining an ethical, equitable approach should also apply to working with off-campus organizations, especially community organizations. Nonprofits and community organizations are usually under-funded, short-staffed, and asked to do a lot of free labor. We encourage slow, careful dialogue with such groups to learn if a guest lecture, site visit, or even semester-long learning project undertaken by students might benefit the nonprofit—and, if not, for educators to respect these decisions. There are often powerful projects students can do that would take no time from a community organization—for example, assessing their communication strategy, doing a content analysis of all press done about the organization, or building out a social media campaign—any of which can then be shared with the organization as an offering at the end of the course.

## CONCLUSION

We have shared one very context-specific example of educational practices that seek to engage students in active learning around issues related to migration. Our approach emphasizes project-based learning, problem-solving, community engagement, empathy, and critical thinking. We aim both to provide students with helpful academic and life skills, and to invite them to be part of solving complex social and scientific problems at the local level. Although our disciplinary approach is that of forensic anthropology, the model of engaging students with a local challenge or cause spearheaded by a government office or community organization is one that can be adapted to almost any discipline, especially those in the social or health sciences. While our approach is grounded in a particular local manifestation of a social problem, this learning model could be adapted anywhere. Wherever educators find themselves in the U.S., they are undoubtedly near places, organizations, and people engaged in work to advocate alongside migrants, immigrants, or refugees. The intrusion of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) into immigrant communities throughout the U.S. has created a multitude of challenges that communities work hard to fight each day. Many students are directly affected by border and immigration violence, and they often know more than they realize about what can be done to support immigrant communities effectively. One of the best things about our work with students is watching them innovate, dream, and lead.

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# Teaching Undergraduate Forced Migration Studies Through a Community-based Law and Policy Clinic During Covid: What Are the Crises and Opportunities?

*Doug Smith and Alejandro Bracamontes*

This is a story of how we sustained, through 2020, 2021, and now into 2022, a community-based law clinic where teachers and students, combining their relative subversive potentials, created a laboratory in which to experiment with ways for lawyers to work in impacted communities in an organizer's voice. It is also a story of how the tragic opportunities created by a worldwide pandemic have led us to a still dimly envisioned model of resistance in communities constructed by legal constraints on migration in the age of Covid-19.

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Recently, after reflecting on my own work and after interviewing many leading movement lawyers involved in immigrant rights work, I wrote that differences between often well-meaning lawyers and effective organizers and activists might boil down to (1) differences in storytelling conventions, (2) time frames, and (3) risk aversion.<sup>1</sup> First, lawyers tell stories about the peculiarity of a client's situation in an effort to convince legal decision makers that granting their client the relief they seek will not impinge on the prevailing social order, an order in which that legal decision maker sits on top. Although lawyering for refugees lends itself to connecting with a wider world of rights and oppression, more than most areas of law<sup>2</sup>—and that is exactly the reason I got into this line of work originally—the Refugee Convention and Protocol and U.S. refugee law insist on proof that individuals were targeted for their peculiar characteristics or histories, and that they are at greater risk because of those things than the rest of the population of even the most dangerous states. Organizers, by contrast, motivate affected communities to tell stories to show that each individual's apparently idiosyncratic problems are deeply connected to the arc of the whole world, and that there is no way to relieve their individual distress without disrupting the prevailing order. Second, lawyers are uncomfortable with engaging in immediate action in the service of the lasting change that organizers demand. Last, lawyers find safety in “no,” “don't,” “try not to.”<sup>3</sup> Organizers spread a “what's next” and “yes, and” attitude within affected communities.

In 2013, I began teaching forced migration to undergraduate students at Brandeis University, in a class called *Immigration and Human Rights*, which focused on anticipated immigration reforms after Barack Obama's reelection, and how those reforms might impact forced migrations and how we might address future migrations due to changing climate and changing contexts. I found that students were surprisingly adept at

<sup>1</sup>Christine Cimini and Doug Smith, “An Innovative Approach to Movement Lawyering: An Immigrant Rights Case Study.” *Georgetown Immigration Law Journal*, 35(2), 431–512 (2021).

<sup>2</sup>See, for example, Deborah E. Anker, “Legal Change from the Bottom Up: The Development of Gender Asylum Jurisprudence in the United States,” in Arbel, E., Dauvergne, C. & Millbank, J., eds. *Gender in Refugee Law: From the Margins to the Centre*, 46–73 (New York: Routledge 2014).

<sup>3</sup>Of course, one is less likely to be criticized (or fired) for an unknown product of an action forgone because of lawyerly warnings. Naysayers are vulnerable only if their warnings are ignored, resulting in success likely to take the sting out of their unheeded advice.



picking up the intricate details and vagaries of notoriously complex U.S. immigration law. They seemed to enjoy migration history, and they joyfully struggled with defining a political philosophy of borders and exclusion, assimilation, segregation or integration, expulsion or accommodation. These students produced amazing projects, which we gathered each year into anthologies about the state of forced migration in 2013, 2014, and 2015. Projects ranged from the practical (guides for families facing deportation, legal briefs, and proposed regulations for gendered asylum) to the imaginative (dance, photo arrays comprising immigrant narratives, podcasts of raids, refugee song lists) to the scholarly (histories of migration in the Maghreb, recent migrations of non-Jews in Israel, the Rohingya crisis in real time) to the awe-inspiring (coordinating a college curriculum for young people in Za'atari refugee camp).

I usually mentioned somewhere along the way that immigration is one of the few areas in which lawyers' monopoly on access to justice was incomplete. Non-lawyers could represent a migrant in proceedings, trials, and appeals, and what limited research existed confirmed my experience that non-lawyers were at least as good at presenting a refugee's story as lawyers.<sup>4</sup> We wondered aloud about the adjacent possibility of refugees translating their own stories (or the stories of other refugees, as it is difficult to vouch for one's own earnest pain) to teach powerholders about forced migrations.

Still, the course felt incomplete. Although end-of-year evaluations were good, there was an underlying curriculum upon which the course barely touched. I tried to show students how on-the-books law differed from refugee law-in-action, how human rights instruments capture neither the work of the institutions and roles they create nor the meaning of human rights documents to the oppressed, the marginalized, the hungry, or the scared. I showed documentaries of authentic law-making, like *Well-Founded Fear* (2000) and *The Law in These Parts* (2011). We read refugee stories and poetry, and we devoured social media. Still students were unprepared to understand, much less to intervene in, issues of forced global migration in the twenty-first century. They lacked the necessary skills to create change in what would soon be a growing, and likely

<sup>4</sup>8 C.F.R. § 1292.1(a)(4). Standards for Recognized Organizations and Accredited Representatives, including the qualifications and application processes, are published at 8 C.F.R. §§ 1292.11–1292.20.

overwhelming, crisis. They had little sense of how refugee identities arose within legal contexts.

On the early morning of November 9, 2016, my phone rang incessantly. It was OK. I was up. You probably were as well. Many of my calls were from students from my Immigration and Human Rights Class. Donald Trump had been elected president of the United States on a platform of nativist populism: students wanted to know what I planned to do. They did not wait for me to respond. They reminded me that I had said that one need not be a lawyer to represent immigrants and that authentic, competent, and empathetic representation might create a refugee law responsive to the horrors and hopes of forced migration. Sure, I said that, but...

Students in the class and others from prior semesters joined in and persisted. I did not even dimly envision the impacts an undergraduate-run immigration law clinic would have on the community, but I fell in line with students' syllogistic reasoning, which went more or less like this:

1. with a boldly nativist president, we have to do something;
2. a community-based immigration law clinic is something; and
3. therefore, we have to construct a community-based immigration law clinic.

For my part, I was excited about the prospect of experimenting in breaking down lawyers' monopoly on access to justice, which largely abandons refugees and asylum seekers to face down immigration systems without representation.<sup>5</sup> Would students rise to the challenge of immigration lawyering? I imagined that combining my crusty supervision and ideas of movement lawyering in immigrant communities with fresh faces and unconstrained questions might produce creative persistence in finding better ways of working with forced migrants.

I had come to Brandeis after three decades of supervising praxis in clinical programs in U.S. law schools, European undergraduate law programs, and Tribal colleges. I knew that a clinical program could teach skills that could not easily be learned in classroom settings—even employing well-constructed simulations. Examples might include ends-means thinking,

<sup>5</sup>For statistics on represented asylum seekers, see Ingrid Eagly and Steven Shafer, "A National Study of Access to Counsel in Immigration Court," *University of Pennsylvania Law Review*, 164 (1: 2015), 1–91.

information acquisition analysis, contingency planning, and decision-making under high uncertainty.<sup>6</sup> The program could also teach familiar lawyering and organizing skills like interviewing, negotiating counseling, fact investigation and manipulation, trial and appellate skills, listening, conducting meetings, public advocacy and popular education, but also agency responsibility, problem-solving, collaboration, cross-cultural awareness, dealing with and leveraging emotions and coping with changing artifacts, testimonies, documentation, social values and expectations, creative relationship-building and advocacy, dealing with, and in, authority, learning how to learn from experience.<sup>7</sup> I was sure that immersing students in communities constructed by forced migrants in the shadow of law and public institutions would provide the texts for learning law-in-action dynamics and how migrant communities relate to emergent legalities, and enable learning refugee law as the friction produced by the interaction of doctrines, roles, and personalities in spaces created by socio-legal institutions.

By the end of the Fall 2016 semester, we created a nonprofit corporation, gave it the ungainly and absurdly clumsy name The Right to Immigration Institute (TRII), and applied for I.R.S. 501(c)(3) charitable corporation status, the prerequisites for becoming a Department of Justice (DOJ) recognized organization that could host DOJ-accredited immigration representatives.

We decided to tackle forced migration in the form of asylum, withholding of removal, relief under the Convention Against Torture (CAT), as well as U and T visas (for survivors of violent crime in the United States and trafficking, respectively) as the areas of greatest unaddressed need in the community. As our location of activism, we chose Waltham, MA, historically a mill town and home to many groups of immigrants. By the time of our uninvited arrival, the city was home to large populations that had fled from Uganda and Guatemala, and lesser numbers of migrants from Honduras, El Salvador, Cameroon, Nigeria, Tanzania, and other countries.

Asylum law in the United States is largely summarized (and here paraphrased) in the law's definition of a refugee as one who is outside her country of origin, and who fears returning to that country because of past

<sup>6</sup>This list of learning goals is drawn from Anthony Amsterdam, (1984), "Clinical Legal Education: A 21st century perspective," *Journal of Legal Education*, 34(4): 2014, 612–618.

<sup>7</sup>This list is derived from Philip Schrag, "Constructing a Clinic," *Clinical Law Review* 3 (1:1996), 175-247. <https://scholarship.law.georgetown.edu/facpub/1157> (last accessed 3/14/2021).

persecution or a well-founded fear of future persecution based on race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group.<sup>8</sup> Asylum remains one of the few opportunities for status and a viable road to a green card and citizenship for a migrant who entered without status, or lost status by reason of overstaying or violating a visa, and who has no family or valued employment prospects in the United States.<sup>9</sup> Asylum takes long hours of research to document harms to the applicant and similarly situated individuals, to flesh out a story that rings true to a legal decision maker, meets the elements of the refugee definition set out above, and seems similar enough to other accepted claims without being too similar. Undergraduate students seemed well-prepared for such research. Asylum (broadly defined here to include CAT relief and withholding of removal) requires a long, intense relationship with traumatized and skeptical individuals who initially saw us as part of an established political class that had authorized their persecution. In our more honest moments, we had to admit they were not entirely wrong. We had work to do.

We began the process by surveying community leaders, clergy, teachers, and social service agencies. We sat uninvited on obvious benches and rode opportune bus routes that connected large apartment complexes. We talked to other immigrant advocacy organizations, legal services providers, and law schools in the state (that turned out badly; more on that below). And we sat each week in a rented room at the town library to offer our help. No one came. Not even lost readers looking for books.

Meanwhile, we were working to secure DOJ recognition for the project and DOJ accreditation for three students who decided to be the first to take this plunge. DOJ accreditation comes in two flavors: partial and full. Partial accreditation allows for signing applications and appearing as counsel at allegedly non-adversarial asylum interviews. Full accreditation allows one to conduct Immigration Court trials and appeals to the Board of Immigration Appeals [BIA]. We decided to first try for partial accreditation for the three pioneers. As mentioned above, initial outreach to local immigration advocacy nonprofits and law schools was less than satisfying. The very idea of students representing irregular migrants in asylum proceedings was met with fierce opposition and rank insult. Upon gentle interrogation, it became clear that even low-paid, but high-status,

<sup>8</sup> See 8 U.S.C. §1101(a)(42).

<sup>9</sup> See 8 U.S.C. §1158.

nonprofit advocates despaired that our students had not been to law school, even as more than one law school clinic director claimed their students were not qualified to handle asylum claims. We then approached CLINIC, a nonprofit arm of Catholic Charities, who offer, and charge for, helping organizations become DOJ-recognized. After several meetings and months of delay, CLINIC turned us down as well, without explanation.

Undeterred, we applied for recognition from the DOJ's EOIR Office of Legal Access Programs. TRII was recognized and advocates accredited in February 2018, and that same month TRII moved in to share offices with WATCH-CDC, a local nonprofit that provided housing and public benefits advocacy and English-language instruction to a largely impoverished immigrant community. For a below-nominal monthly rent, WATCH lent us its copier, reams of paper (asylum applications average 1100–1800 pages), post-it notes, a phone, Internet service, a filing cabinet, and their hold on the trust of Waltham's immigrant communities, which WATCH had earned over 30 years of service in the community.

Building on a platform of experimentation and assessment, TRII continued to grow over the next two years. We developed a student training presented in a classroom with the idea of developing a common vocabulary for the praxis of the TRII office. The initial TRII pre-praxis classes were held at night without compensation or credits, or even any university recognition for students, who both taught and listened, as a beta test of a proposal for a three-course portfolio to be run over the summer as a full-time experience in practice. The three courses, integrated, but nominally identified, for registration as *Immigration and Human Rights*, *Conflict Analysis and Resolution*, and *Practicum*, indeed ran that summer, providing hard-money funding sufficient to run the program year-round as well as trainees destined to become the next generation of forced migration advocates.<sup>10</sup>

Through the following year, TRII student-advocates successfully provided high-quality free representation and advice to poor migrants and became a valued resource in the community. They provided training and know-your-rights sessions, while assisting me in our adjacent human rights portfolio, consisting mostly of housing, employment, and civil rights disputes. In doing so, TRII gained the trust of diverse migrant communities,

<sup>10</sup>The Consortium on Undergraduate Law and Justice Programs (CULJP) honored me as representative of the project for innovation and excellence in undergraduate law and justice teaching.

through persistent, creative, and mostly successful immigration representation and through learning more about and supporting those communities' priorities through activism and advocacy.

Thus, the TRII experiment proved its early critics wrong. First, it showed that students could provide competent legal representation in asylum, and that they possessed the motivation, assertiveness in the face of power, and persistence to continue doing so. Together, students and supervisors developed a case load equivalent to the small refugee movement law and policy shop we had become—about 150 cases, not including brief service and advice, mostly involving referrals to providers for unforced migration applications and safety planning for those whose situations did not provide a path to legalization under United States immigration law.<sup>11</sup> TRII also partnered with a unique Medical and Psychological-Legal-Educational Partnership called the Wrap-Around program, designed to provide holistic services to newly arrived forced migrant families with the specific goals of improving the high school graduation rates of migrant youth.

Second, TRII demonstrated the benefit of collaborations among experienced attorneys, committed students, and impacted communities. This synergy became less a welcome luxury and more an absolute necessity in the world in which TRII developed. As soon as TRII started, the already-hostile ground of immigration enforcement began to change, tectonically at first, but then as a constant humming of the churn of executive orders, appellate decisions, statutes, institutions, roles, and personalities made the U.S. and the world a far more dangerous and uncertain sanctuary for

<sup>11</sup> Indeed, students were successful in cases that were mostly selected after established legal organizations and law school clinics had rejected these clients (often leaving them with limited time to file for asylum and broken trust in a system that had failed them once again). From an original class of about 30 students, we retained about 14 truly regular students putting in 5–30 hours a week, depending on the student and the cases and causes in which they were involved. I was later joined by one other full-time and two part-time experienced business lawyers who were practicing refugee law for the first time and three foreign human rights lawyers from other countries who were studying in LLM programs at Boston-area law schools, who all acted as teachers and guides in reflection upon, and generalization from, experience which was the text and syllabus for TRII.

forced migrants. These changes were so frequent, surprising, and consequential that expert trackers became a necessity.<sup>12</sup>

In response, students engaged in regulatory comment-making, urging political action and participating as adjuncts in large-scale issue litigation, as well as working individual cases and broad causes. As supervisors and practitioners, we had to adjust our commitment to non-directive instruction, a dilemma with which law school clinicians had openly struggled. In a clinical legal studies setting, nondirective teaching means not giving students easy answers to questions, instead encouraging students search for answers with teachers employing guided reflection to help the students generalize to other problem-solving challenges.<sup>13</sup> Nondirective teaching in this setting also implies that the teacher is not telling students what cases to take or directing students what to do in order to represent clients. Rather, such teaching encourages student agency and creative problem-solving (and creating conditions for students to safely fail, where possible), guiding students to consider possible opportunities and constraints in problem-solving, and working with students, clients, and collaborators to generalize from the experience. Our accommodation was for teachers to use nondirective instruction where time constraints made it possible, being transparent about our thought processes, research activities, and

<sup>12</sup>In addition to trying to stay atop developments, see Lucas Guttentag's Immigration Policy Tracking Project at <https://immpolicytracking.org/home> (last accessed 3/14/2021). We of course include in our course international documents including the so-called International Bill of Rights, the Refugee Convention and Protocol, Convention Against Torture, Cartagena Declaration, and the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants, among others, as well as clarifying statements, commentary, and leading cases construing those instruments and U.S., European, South African, Israeli, and other states' immigration laws (I am happy to provide our complete readings on request). For the law-in-action of refugee practice, see David Scott Fitzgerald's *Refuge Beyond Reach: How Rich Democracies Repel Asylum Seekers* (Oxford University Press 2019). Finally, I would be remiss, not only for forgoing this chance for shameless self-promotion but also in failing to highlight the research opportunities in community-based teaching-through-action, if I did not mention here a series of three articles on emergent modes of movement lawyering in migrant communities that I am writing with a colleague at University of Washington Law School, the first of which is: Cimini, C. and Smith, D. (2021) "An Innovative Approach to Movement Lawyering: An Immigrant Rights Case Study." 35(2) *Georgetown Immigration Law Journal*, 35(2), 431–512 (2021).

<sup>13</sup>For a fuller description along with a critical view of the use of non-directive teaching methods in a clinical setting, see Martinez, S.A. (2016) "Why are We Doing This? Cognitive Science and Nondirective Supervision in Clinical Teaching." *Kansas Journal of Law & Public Policy* 26(1), 24–47.

decision-making when time was more pressing—and being unapologetically directive when time was short and clients’ interests were at stake.

During the next summer, we expanded the course to the Waltham community, and held training sessions for community leaders, most of whom turned out to be former or current local politicians, clergy, K-12 teachers, and college professors. After starting as a 12-credit Brandeis summer intensive course, we are now working from a model in which a few Brandeis students who have, or are taking, the Immigration and Human Rights course get two additional “practicum” credits (and the instructor \$250 per student per semester), which represents weak acknowledgment of the rich intellectual challenges that TRII students confront daily. A proposal for a stand-alone six-credit practicum course is now under consideration. In addition, we now offer training and opportunities for DOJ accreditation for community leaders, refugees, and other forced migrants.

Most domestic colleges realized the impacts of Covid-19 during March 2020. The path for my stand-up classes, such as Immigration and Human Rights, seemed clear enough: students would disperse to their homes and class would reconvene online thereafter, likely for the rest of the year. But what could a community-based social science laboratory and movement law shop like TRII do? We had worked too long and too hard to overcome Brandeis’ reputation for dilettantism; instead, TRII had secured an essential place in the community because of its commitment to building relationships as the medium of social change. Moreover, we had clients and cases in courts that could not be abandoned. A few students stayed on to staff the office. The majority, forced to return to faraway homes, would relearn our ways of practice at a distance.

We would need space. It would no longer be possible to share space with another busy social service agency. So we secured a space next to a homeless shelter and a few doors down from a substance treatment center and programs for at-risk juveniles. We were able to maintain our strong community presence. This became increasingly critical as other immigrant legal services agencies in the area went completely online, offering only brief service and advice, forsook intakes altogether, or shut their doors forever. But most student planning and reflection sessions (and soon court hearings) would be by Zoom.

We struggled to negotiate trusting relationships by WhatsApp and to level disparities in Internet access, devices, and safe spaces from which to connect with us, but, at the same time, we leveraged opportunities to unobtrusively observe student-client interactions; to access off-screen



notes, hints, and gestures; and to create openings with clients who found talking by phone or interacting by Zoom much more comfortable owing to their histories of trauma and consequent desire for contextual control. While frustrated by closed courts, we were imagining the adjacent possible resistance in representation undeterred by geographic distance, allowing us to join in out-of-state litigation, to advise distant migrants or consult distant experts.

### WHAT'S NEXT?

A conversation with Alejandro Bracamontes, TRII DOJ-accredited immigration representative, and Doug Smith, TRII executive director

**Doug Smith:**

What's next for TRII?

**Alejandro Bracamontes:**

We will train people from refugee communities to become fully accredited DOJ representatives, working together to address forced migration and its aftermaths.

**Smith:**

Why?

**Bracamontes:**

To bring masses of people to address appalling lack of representation in immigration courts, especially the detained, while also bringing more committed, better, more culturally aware and language-appropriate representatives who can understand, in ways we never will, how it feels to be detained and detested in their home countries and to teach immigration judges why migrants fled. They become effective leaders in their communities—in immigration, sure—but also in other areas of need: health care, food, education. Also, this will be a replicable model that can change the face of forced migration.

**Smith:**

It seems like you are invested in the idea of impacted community leadership?

**Bracamontes:**

I agree leadership from impacted communities is essential to durable and real change. Impacted people are trusted to advocate what is necessary and valued in communities. Only impacted leaders can best tell stories.

Only they can be trusted to lead or instigate change.

**Smith:** You use the term “ambient carceral state.” What do you mean by that?

**Bracamontes:** I mean the stories, data, rumors current in immigrant communities which engender fear and isolation as a result of misinformation. Data that instill fear or misspent trust and keep people from fully exercising rights or self-deporting or acting in ways that bring them to the attention of authorities based on incomplete or incorrect expectations. Refugees who train and teach and advocate with TRII will be resources to disrupt the ambient carceral state. It takes the dynamic on at its core by developing leadership that is trusted in immigrant communities and widely spreading information from the perspective of the experience of forced migration to the U.S. today. We don’t expect that all of the refugees who go through TRII training will become accredited representatives with us, but they will be informed and connected and create a bridge among immigrant communities and the agencies that seek to serve them.

**Smith:** Interesting: I know you know that surrounding towns have sought to address community fears by developing sophisticated apps to map ICE enforcement initiatives and warn at-risk individuals and entities, but your conception of how to address incipient community fears leverages trusted and stable voices who are network hubs in within relatively compact networks, correct?

**Bracamontes:** Exactly. We are coming at the same problem from different orientations.

**Smith:** How has Covid affected your work or your learning (or both)?

**Bracamontes:** It's led to both more work and more challenges. Our working theory is that building relationships with migrants would be the medium of change. We develop relationships that don't replicate the oppressive hierarchies that our clients have survived. We were loath to give up in-person meetings for this reason, but also because many other advocacy shops went fully online or just shut down intake because of Covid, when migrant communities faced increased risks. We struggled to find ways to continue to serve communities, including spending much of our entire budget<sup>14</sup> to rent unshared space big enough to accommodate safe practices and increasing client needs, but, in doing so, we discovered means of fostering relationships online that opens up whole new possibilities for training and representing people at a distance—in hospitals or detention, for example, or at the border.

**Smith:** What is your experience with the interdisciplinary Wraparound project?

**Bracamontes:** I think that it's a great model for the communities we work with. Providing a whole person, whole community approach involving the city's schools, psychological and medical professionals, recreation for the people we work with who are survivors of trauma, and our work is so much better working in concert with specialists and resources that permits people to come to

<sup>14</sup>TRII's funding comes from private donations, foundation grants, and our partnership in the Wraparound project, which is a program focused on recently arrived families from Central America. Wraparound was the first Medical-Legal-Educational-Counseling entity in the United States, and, as the name might suggest, Wraparound aims to provide integrated social, legal, and medical resources to newly arrived immigrant families with the objective of increasing opportunities for school-bound children in families in crisis to graduate from high school by addressing immediate needs facing the entire family in a comprehensive way.

terms with the context that led them to flee their countries. I also am interested in the idea of focusing holistic services on a measurable ideal, here high school graduation, and confronting everything that goes into something as concrete as high school graduation with a limited cohort of migrant teens, which not only creates change and success for those families but reveals the indicators of success and happiness for forced migrants generally.

**Smith:** I notice you use the word “praxis” a lot. How is that concept important to your learning and/or your work?

**Bracamontes:** Given the constant flux of the immigration system, “crimmigration” enforcement, and the relationships between the community and each connected but individual migrant, and since oppressive institutions are constantly recreating themselves, TRII is a learning organism that is constantly adjusting to ride the wave of reactions and counter-reactions to changing meanings of oppression.

**Smith:** What makes you believe refugees can serve as effective advocates in immigration courts and BIA?

**Bracamontes:** Having worked with refugees for four years, and having learned advocacy from the ground up myself, I know refugees have potential for a level of empathy and commitment and authentic storytelling much more advanced than even the best U.S. lawyers or organizers, plus they often come from radical advocacy backgrounds in far more hostile terrain than they will face in the U.S. immigration system.

**Smith:** How would you compare learning in the classroom to what you learn in working at TRII?

- Bracamontes:** While it's important to have some knowledge of laws and procedures and some common vocabulary to discuss the work we are involved in, there is a joy and complexity and responsibility and living praxis that just cannot be created in a classroom—even with simulated exercises. There is also an atmosphere of experimentation, feedback, and reentering the arena that inculcates creative problem-solving and storytelling that cannot be recreated in any other way.
- Smith:** A few new organizations have opened since TRII started to provide online training to prepare nonlawyers to assist immigration lawyers. How is TRII different?
- Bracamontes:** We have an office in which *we* do the work in the training, and the education and training we get in terms of praxis and experimentation and after-action review is a qualitatively different experience. Beyond that, no matter how good their training might be, other programs' graduates have to find their own placements with established lawyers, so their model, while wonderful, only marginally increases the mass power of immigrant advocacy and does not foster novel and creative ways of working with immigrant communities or advocating for them or retelling their stories to create social change. Moreover, those organizations are necessarily aggressively student-centered, and we are focused on migrant communities and impacted-community-led organizations. We understand that orientation, and TRII, actually started that way—celebrating student successes and geared toward preparing effective advocates for the future. But TRII is much more focused now on supporting impacted communities creating their own change on their own terms in the here and now.

**Smith:** Is there one action or activity TRII does that stands out?

**Bracamontes:** Every action we take is political and changes the fabric of the communities of which we are a part and the processes that disrupt oppression.

**Smith:** What about the name?

**Bracamontes:** As TRII transforms into a refugee-led organization whose actions are informed by the needs of the community it serves, I think the name no longer fits or sends the right message about who we are, and impedes our constant effort to convince the communities of which we are a part that we are not connected to the oppressive establishment from which they are seeking relief. It's about freeing people from fear.

**Smith:** Does TRII have any mechanisms in place to keep it tracking that mission?

**Bracamontes:** As noted earlier, we were in touch with established immigrant advocacy and legal services organizations as well as the communities we served before we opened doors, and having a community-based storefront office invites constant community feedback on whether we are responding to the most urgent needs in an effective and accountable manner—and how we can do better. We have a diverse, community-based board of directors to make sure we stay mission-focused and the board is the keeper of institutional history and lessons learned. The board, and the broader community it represents, guide us now and into the future as a learning organization. Everyone involved in TRII has internalized our ends-means, plan-do-after-action-review model of praxis, and that model plays out in more formal class sessions, in individual meetings, team meetings, ad hoc learning groups, in twice weekly all-TRII sessions, as well as in board meetings.

## FURTHER READING

For the Immigration and Human Rights course, we use as texts John Washington's excellent recent book, *The Dispossessed*, which provides a very readable summary of asylum histories from antiquity to the present, U.S. immigration laws and enforcement, on the books and on the streets, from the beginning of the country through the Trump era woven together with stories of individual migrations. We also read *All-American Nativism*, by Daniel Denvir (2020), to explore the roots and stock stories of Nativism and racism that propel immigration restriction and targeting of forced migrations. *The Undocumented Americans*, by Karla Cornejo Villavicencio, (2020) is a funny and currently-relatable account of immigrant experience today. We read *The Displaced: Refugee Writers on Refugee Lives* by Viet Thanh Nguyen (2018), poetry by my former colleague at Suffolk University Law School's clinics, Martin Espada—most recently *Floaters* (W.W. Norton 2021)—and selections from Dora Ahmad's *The Penguin Book of Migration Literature* (2019).

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# Court Interpretation, or Ganas Goes Legit

*Jonathan Pitcher*

Seven years ago, almost to the day, two students presented themselves in my office with an idea, or at that point simply an impulse. I had just returned from the Sonora-Nogales border, shepherded around in mini-buses between one presentation and another, interspersed with harrowing courtroom scenes of perfunctorily sanctioned mass deportation. The task had become Sisyphean, and liberalism's reactions to it superficial (or, worse still, self-perpetuating), so I was done.

In other words, as one of the students quite courageously ventured, perhaps such courses and even the trips were their own form of exoticism—a simulated, vicarious journey, particularly when there were so many undocumented migrant workers in the immediate area off campus, in Vermont and Upstate New York.

Thus, “Ganas,” a shifting signifier, materialized.

Jumping ahead, the course description now defines Ganas as “a community-driven, cross-cultural association that provides students with volunteer opportunities to engage with the predominantly undocumented

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*For Susan Sgorbati*

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Latino migrant worker population,” with its name most often rendered in this context as “the motivation to act.” Initially, though, *Ganas* was merely classified as a group tutorial, in which we visited local dairy farms, chatted to the families, and supported their concerns. It was deemed a Spanish class. Bennington College, at its best, has a long tradition of student-defined, faculty-facilitated work, and we remained true to that model to some extent. Yet, rather than indulging in academic solipsism or teenage angst, we forced ourselves to listen, thereby creating a program of sorts through the community’s needs rather than our own. Their needs included medical interpreting during doctors’ appointments, assistance with the DMV, liaising with Head Start, transportation (while it may seem idyllic, New England is also a place of numbing isolation, and many of our members knew little of each other’s existence), occasional readings, English classes,<sup>1</sup> and social events, by which I mean free soup and some arts and crafts at a nearby church.

Operating outside the curriculum, evaluations were irrelevant, I received no salary as a nominal tutor, we had no budget, and we used our private cars. It would be hubristic to assume that anyone even knew what *Ganas* was, and easy, in hindsight, to imbue this humble origin with a proto-modern, liberating, revolutionary fervor. In reality, *Ganas* was closer to an arcane, medieval beginning, within the traditions of home, structure, sacrifice, social responsibility, and mutual education, perhaps akin to the later Slavoj Žižek’s “zero-level . . . , experienced only retroactively, as the presupposition of a new political intervention” (692), or at its most basic an ad hoc, community-engaged project.

The intervention, however, was sincere, fervent, and it accelerated. Over the next four years, enrollment multiplied ten times over, and the population we served grew from a couple of families to around a hundred. It was a long way from handing out business cards in Walmart or China Wok and taping posters to lampposts. Projects expanded to include women’s groups, high-school counseling, guest speakers, conferences, an almost nightly radio show, a web presence, advertising, frequent and more elaborate social events, financial literacy workshops, Spanish classes for farmers, and more overt political engagement (through Migrant Justice

<sup>1</sup> At the time, “A study in Vermont found that only 4% of Hispanic dairy workers said they spoke English well and 64% said they had little to no English language ability. In the same study, when asked about how well their farm employers spoke Spanish, 68% of workers said that no one on the farm spoke Spanish” (Baker and Chappelle 2012, 1–2).

and Milk with Dignity). We also met with consulates of the countries of origin, schools, the police, and the town council and did academic work on food, detention, education, security, drugs, family welfare, and identity.

An introductory course on forced migration and its consequences for the area became a permanent fixture of the Bennington curriculum and a gateway to Ganas, now part of my regular teaching contract. We were subsumed under the Center for the Advancement of Public Action (CAPA), received a few hundred dollars each year, and most participants became licensed to drive college vans, which were leaving campus two or three times a day. The group remained duly proud of its autonomy, some lines of inquiry burned out, some never quite left the ground, but most succeeded. Given that the academic year was, of course, neatly packaged into two fifteen-week semesters, while the world we inhabited did not respect those boundaries, it all continued, as far as possible, beyond such confines, every day of the year, existing both within and outside of a curricular system that simultaneously supported and marginalized its forays into community activism and experiential learning.

Over time, students began making Ganas the centerpiece of their education, through vociferous and real commitment, while others flitted in and out. Independently, the Bennington Admissions Office was consciously internationalizing its intake and directing more attention to students of color in the U.S., which, in the inevitable lag between written policy and supportive practice, sensed particularly by Spanish speakers in search of a home away from home, meant the Ganas group was a natural draw. With our track record, we became leaders of an informal association, specifically oriented around our work, coupling it to similar programs at Middlebury, Dartmouth, and the University of Vermont. As we grew, events were opened to the campus community, announcements issued in faculty meetings, and presentations delivered on prospective student days.

While Ganas was not co-opted, the college had understood the impact of the work and its potential for student engagement with the community, and it began to include the program in marketing and recruitment materials. There were meetings with the Dean's Office regarding how to formalize our offerings and to define the program. One idea that quickly emerged was to develop qualifications in teaching English as a new language, translation, and counseling, certificates we could all hold on to, assess, and endorse over any undergraduate's four years. Having subsisted on a shoestring budget for so long, however, the expectation was that we would produce this curriculum without adding more faculty.

We were not always our own best advocates under such circumstances, perhaps because the identity of the group had been defined by serving the needs of the target community; in documenting ourselves documenting them, the impetus would be compromised. The drive that prompted a student to sign up for this sort of work was somehow at odds with publicizing it in a brochure. An invitation to discuss our progress on national radio came and went. Weekly reporting within the group was increasingly divergent, even erratic. Reciprocal feedback ebbed and flowed.

The wake-up call was the coverage of the euphemistically named “Migrant Caravan” in 2017–2018. Spanish-speaking students flocked to the courthouse in Albany, NY, to offer their entirely viable abilities as interpreters, only to be barred due to an entirely nonviable lack of a single license among the lot of them.<sup>2</sup>

We were also on the brink of receiving funding from The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation as one of Bennington’s signature programs in the Consortium on Forced Migration, Displacement, and Education, founded by Vassar, Sarah Lawrence, Bennington, and Bard. The funding allowed us to live up to our ambitions, not least providing student internships to ensure more consistency of service throughout the calendar year. In hindsight, Ganas’ condition as outlandish was of course a false premise. Given the widespread incarceration of migrants, their illegalization, the barbarity of detention centers, and, perhaps most offensively, the separation of families, so much of the literature, the interviews, the anecdotes, and our lived experience seven years later focus on the desire to *belong*, beyond a spectral, alienated presence. This need to feel housed, to make meaning of one’s environment, is depicted most succinctly in Cristóbal Mendoza’s exercise of asking his immigrant interviewees to produce maps of the places where they supposedly live, with the complexity (or lack thereof) of the drawings telling their own psychological and very real story. Here is one such map from Mendoza’s exercise (Fig. 1):

It was time for Ganas to go overtly legit.

The National Center for State Courts (NCSC) was amenable, providing resources, glossaries, tactics for interpretation, and even mock tests.

<sup>2</sup>There is less of a distinction north of the border: “In Canada, where no professional distinction is made between legal and community interpreters, interpreters are expected to adhere to the same standards in all settings, which simplifies their decision-making process when faced with communication barriers, and in almost all cases limits their interventions to linguistic transfer” (Bancroft et al. 2013, 106).



**Fig. 1** Salvador's map of Albuquerque: "Mountains, river, and valley" (Mendoza, Cristóbal). "Transnational Spaces through Local Places: Mexican Immigrants in Albuquerque (New Mexico)." *Journal of Anthropological Research*. 62.4 (2006) p. 547

Over several months, however, the more we spoke, the more it became clear that the NCSC's angle was to cajole Vermont into accepting the National Examination, with Bennington's CAPA as a northern outpost of their dominion. This attitude reflected a general problem, since it is easy to discard a student-led project as unreliable and transient.

Vermont, on the other hand, via the Office of the Court Administrator, personified in the figure of Jeremy Zeliger, the senior programs manager for Vermont's Division of Planning and Court Services, was aware of the limitations of its procedure (signing an affidavit as to one's linguistic abilities, giving interpretation a try, and generally being dismissed a few days later). Despite the need to change, Zeliger was loath to subscribe to the National Examination given its 10% pass rate, which seemed self-defeating in a state with a relatively small population. Even for the bilingual, court interpretation is challenging. It requires a sadly repetitive yet niche vocabulary, ranging from gender-based violence to substance abuse. Zeliger, however, was persistent, both an advocate and an organizer, and reprioritized court interpreting, managing to band together a task force of experts responsible for different aspects of a new state curriculum and testing procedure; we met via conference calls for hours at a time. He had even retro-developed a pedagogy, based on Harold D. Stolovitch and Erica J. Keeps' *Telling Ain't Training*, and each participant was assigned homework. My contribution was the creation of a Latin glossary of legal terms, which I

duly submitted, giddy in anticipation of the first in-person meeting of the group in Montpelier in June 2019.

I never saw anyone else's contribution (and I realize that I am about to play into every stereotype of government work here), because, as we were informed via email (of all things), Zeliger resigned from the Vermont Judiciary. Scott Harris, Chief of Planning and Court Services, subsequently informed us that court interpretation had once more been deprioritized to the bottom of the list, and would perhaps be entertained again in three or four years.

All was not lost, however, because the Benningtonian ethos of doing-is-learning, teaching-is-practice, came through, eschewing both state and national bureaucracy in a no-doubt-precipitous fit of impatience. By now, we had almost unwittingly become amateur scholars in the field, and had been granted access to the national examination materials along with myriad case scenarios and transcripts from Vermont, allowing our process and certification to mirror the national standards while including real, local, contemporary content. We would simply write our own exams and host a weekend of workshops and test-taking at CAPA, bowling over any objections or competition. The workshops were set, expert speakers were booked, and three Spanish faculty were ready to supervise and adjudicate. The pilot program was ready. Twenty-five candidates would arrive on campus on a Friday evening and receive their results by the Sunday afternoon. Nevertheless, the Mellon-funded Consortium's legal adviser was, understandably, perturbed by this damn-the-consequences approach, and queried the worthiness or use-value of the certificate that candidates would ultimately obtain. In the wake of such concerns, the plan morphed into a preparatory course, which I would teach within the Consortium's curriculum, including all of the same materials and workshops (on the ethics of translation, court and medical terminology) but also more expansive readings on legal context and interpretation, with a view to passing the National Exam.

This is a largely intense, disciplined classroom work, as we sweat out sight, consecutive and simultaneous interpretations each week. I am indebted to those students who rather courageously registered for the first incarnation, not least for taking control of their learning and transforming what appeared to be a top-down, text-driven syllabus with professorial feedback and plenty of time to prep cases between sessions, into a fast-paced, collective barrage of unseen interpretations. This requires advanced levels of Spanish and English, and a fairly sunny disposition. It has also

become part of a more general push to instill more formal objectives in the context of Ganas, with evaluation to boot, across all preexisting projects, and to hold ourselves to account in more explicit ways, thus allowing students in the program to feel as though they are not only providing valued intellectual and social services to the community, but also progressing as appropriately credentialed undergraduates.

Toward the end of the course, it is too soon to tell whether anyone will sit for the National Exam. Most of those who flocked to the courthouse in Albany have graduated. Only one member of Ganas cross-enrolled. This may be a challenge of institutionalizing student-imagined programs more generally, with their endemic turnover rate. I would suggest, however, that while the ends of both Ganas and obtaining court interpretation certificates are similar, their means are quite different, as are their demands, with little intrinsic overlap beyond linguistic ability, and therefore the two projects appeal to different crowds. Regardless, I can only hope that a couple of takeaways from our experience are that numbers are not always the best measure of value and, without wishing to sound sanguine, that such programs at least deserve a fair crack at refashioning the institutions themselves.

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# Searching for Safety and Researching for Justice: Documenting Migrant Experiences in the Paso del Norte Border Region

*Neil Harvey, Jeremy Slack, Nancy Mateo, Zaira Martin,  
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How can higher education advance knowledge of the harmful conditions faced by migrants fleeing violence and poverty in ways that support ongoing efforts to achieve change in how they are perceived and treated in the U.S.? This chapter seeks to address this question through discussion of the National Science Foundation-Research Experience for Undergraduates

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(NSF-REU) Site Program on Immigration Policy and Border Communities, co-directed by Neil Harvey and Jeremy Slack since 2018.<sup>1</sup>

The program focuses on the challenges facing migrants and residents of border communities in the Paso del Norte region (comprising Las Cruces, Southern New Mexico, El Paso, and Ciudad Juárez). It brings together ten undergraduate students from across the country for ten weeks each summer in which a faculty team provides training and mentoring in qualitative research methods and immigration policy. Students are divided into groups of three or four and partnered with local immigrant advocacy groups on a variety of projects important to these groups and the wider community (Table 1).

The program uses a Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR) approach in which students, faculty, and community partners identify the most meaningful topics or needs for research with an eye to supporting more just and humane ways of responding to forced migration. This approach is discussed in more detail below, but, at its core, CBPR allows

<sup>1</sup>The authors would like to acknowledge the support of the National Science Foundation (Social, Behavioral and Economic Sciences, SBE Division) [Award # 1659195](#) that made the work described in this chapter possible. We also thank all of the staff of our community partner organizations for their time and collaboration: Hope Border Institute, ACLU-Regional Center for Border Rights, Border Network for Human Rights, New Mexico Comunidades en Acción y de Fe (NM CAFe), Advocate Visitors With Immigrants in Detention (AVID), Las Américas Immigrant Advocacy Center and the El Paso Immigration Collaborative, as well as faculty mentors Cynthia Bejarano, Sabine Hirschauer and Megan Finno-Velasquez (at NMSU), and Cristina Morales, Josiah Heyman and Gina Núñez-Mchiri (at UTEP), and our graduate assistants, Luis Siura and Ana Fuentes at UTEP and Kelsey Bowman, Ricardo Trejo and Angeline Sunday at NMSU. For details about our program's activities, syllabi and products, see our website: <https://borderreu.nmsu.edu/>. This program has been renewed for three years (2022–25) with NSF Award #2149499.

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**Table 1** NSF REU Site Program on Immigration Policy and Border Communities (2018–2021): Summary of Community Partner Organizations and Projects

	<i>2018</i>	<i>2019</i>	<i>2020–2021</i>
American Civil Liberties (ACLU)—Regional Center for Border Rights (Las Cruces)	Court observations of Operation Streamline	Court observations of Operation Streamline; Know Your Rights trainings received and given in Spanish; interviews with community leaders regarding sanctuary policies	
Border Network for Human Rights (BNHR), El Paso and Las Cruces	History of BNHR; responses to separation of children under Zero Tolerance		
Hope Border Institute (El Paso and Ciudad Juárez)	Asylum policy research; court observation of asylum hearings	Accompaniment of asylum seekers at El Paso/Juárez border; observation of MPP hearings	Analysis of root causes of migration from Central America; creating an educational program for migrant shelter in Cd. Juárez, Mexico
NM Comunidades en Acción y de Fe (CAFe) (Las Cruces)		Accompaniment in community organizing and outreach work of CAFe in southwest New Mexico	
Advocate Visitors with Immigrants in Detention (AVID) (Las Cruces)			Analysis of conditions in local ICE detention centers during pandemic; analysis of borderland newspaper coverage of immigrant detention; analysis of ICE center inspection reports
Las Américas Immigrant Advocacy Center (El Paso) El Paso Immigration Collaborative (EPIC)			Wellness check: conditions of confinement during Covid-19 pandemic Immigration detention trends under the Biden administration

for more inclusion of community voices in the design, implementation, and evaluation of research compared to more traditional modes of inquiry in which academic expertise is given primacy.

It is also important to note the context in which this program has been implemented. The original REU proposal, written in the summer of 2015, already identified key problems, particularly the effects of a rapid expansion of immigration enforcement and border security agencies, the increase in migrants classified as “criminal aliens,” the resulting growth in both detention and deportation, the weak accountability of the agents and practices of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and Customs and Border Patrol (CBP), and the marginalization of the voices of border communities (Díaz-Barriga and Dorsey 2020). This set of issues has a long history that, since the early 1990s, has led to a growing association of immigrants with criminality through various legal means that transform minor offenses into far more serious charges when committed by immigrants.

Our original proposal was not accepted, but, on second submission, it was approved by the NSF in early 2017. Due to the tight schedule for recruiting our first summer cohort, our first program ran in the summer of 2018, followed by the second in 2019. The pandemic obliged us to postpone the 2020 program until summer 2021, although we continued to work remotely during this time.

Implementation of this program coincided with the ratcheting up of anti-immigrant rhetoric and practices by then-President Trump. Building on the already expansive structures and agencies of immigration and border enforcement, the new administration took many additional steps designed to make life even more difficult for unauthorized immigrants living in the U.S., as well as for migrants seeking to cross the southern border and seek asylum or reunification with their families. Before discussing how students engaged in research during these years, we briefly describe three significant policy changes: (a) the expansion of those immigrants deemed a priority for deportation, (b) the Zero Tolerance policy announced in May 2018, and (c) the Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP or “Remain in Mexico”), implemented in 2019.

(a) *Expanding the Deportable Population and Local Responses: Sanctuary Versus Zero Tolerance (2017)*

President Trump’s Executive Orders of January 25, 2017, ended the Priority Enforcement Program (PEP) established by the Obama administration in July 2015. PEP sought to focus enforcement efforts on

undocumented immigrants who had committed serious, violent crimes, leaving close to 90 percent of the 11 million undocumented population relatively free from the threat of deportation. By eliminating PEP, the Trump administration made *all* undocumented immigrants a priority for removal, leading to an increase in the number of people detained through tactics ranging from highly publicized ICE raids to arrests for minor offenses and traffic charges. This policy separated families and drove fear into immigrant communities. The government tried to enlist local and state police in its crackdown on undocumented immigrants and threatened it would withhold federal funds from cities that refused to comply. Community leaders in Las Cruces and El Paso argued that using local police as part of a wider deportation force would undermine community trust and that such cooperation should be prevented. As a result, the debates over sanctuary versus zero tolerance began to reshape local as well as national politics.

(b) *Zero Tolerance, Family Separation and Operation Streamline (2018)*

In May 2018, just before the start of our first summer program, the then-Attorney General Jeff Sessions announced the government's Zero Tolerance policy toward undocumented immigrants. This policy led to the separation of thousands of children from their parents at the border. Arguing that parents were guilty of human smuggling by bringing their children with them as they attempted to cross the border, Sessions not only dismissed the reality that families seek asylum together, but also produced a new level of suffering by forcibly removing children and placing them in separate camps. In addition, the Zero Tolerance policy increased the number of migrants subjected to mass processing through the Operation Streamline program. This program had started under the second administration of George W. Bush when the then-Secretary of DHS Michael Chertoff introduced the Secure Border Initiative, part of the exponential increase in border enforcement and criminalization of undocumented immigrants. In addition to the well-known "prevention through deterrence" policies of the 1990s, which forced migrants to cross inhospitable deserts between now heavily policed urban areas, the government added the prospect of criminal conviction and detention as further deterrence. This strategy was codified as Operation Streamline, which began at a U.S. federal court in Del Rio, Texas, and by 2008 had expanded to all other border districts (except the Southern District of California). Under Operation Streamline proceedings, more and more people were brought

before immigration judges in large groups of as many as eighty, shackled at their hands and feet, to be processed rapidly without proper legal representation or even clear knowledge of their rights. Advocacy groups such as the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) began to document a range of due-process violations in Operation Streamline, and, in this context, some students in our program participated as court observers in Las Cruces to report on such violations and to produce an observation manual for continued use.

(c) *Remain in Mexico: A Death Sentence for Asylum Seekers*

The MPP (“Remain in Mexico” policy) was negotiated between the U.S. and Mexican governments in November 2018, and was first implemented in San Diego in January 2019 before extending along the entire border. Before MPP, asylum seekers were able to wait in the U.S. until their court appointment. However, under MPP, they were sent to Mexico’s northern border cities to wait, exposing them to some of the most violent places in the world. By April 2020, some 64,000 asylum seekers (mostly from Central America) had been removed from the U.S. under MPP. Stranded in unknown environments, many became prey to organized crime, which has steadily used deported migrants as forced labor in their violent conflicts with rival organizations in the past decade (Slack 2019). Aware of such dangers, community-based advocacy groups such as the Hope Border Institute in El Paso called for an end to MPP and for the U.S. to uphold its commitments under international law to provide protections on U.S. soil for people fleeing gang-related and other forms of violence in their countries of origin.

## DOCUMENTING THE HUMAN IMPACTS OF ZERO TOLERANCE POLICIES

The sudden announcement of each of these policies and their rapid, dramatic, and harmful impacts on both long-settled immigrants and recent asylum seekers compelled our students to learn quickly about their effects as they were unfolding. The CBPR approach, we argue, proved particularly essential in this context. Community partners were able to make timely use of students’ research, while the students benefited from experiential learning outside the classroom. The following sections discuss the main benefits of CBPR in seeking to understand how forced migration affects immigrants at the U.S.-Mexico border during Zero Tolerance. We

first explain why we chose CBPR for this program and then discuss students' experiences, based on their own testimonies.

### WHY COMMUNITY-BASED PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH?

Schensul et al. provide a useful overview of collaborative research methods (2014). They note that CBPR has three distinctive features: (1) it is based on partnerships between researchers and community organizations, leaders, and residents who live in the areas affected by the issues to be studied, and as such, CBPR tries to minimize inequalities between researchers and research subjects; (2) CBPR seeks to generate new knowledge that can help bring about change; and (3) CBPR involves community members at all stages of research, from identifying key issues for study, to collecting data and evaluating results. Thus, CBPR supports collaborative rather than extractive research, and thereby builds trust for longer-term, change-oriented projects. Expertise comes not only from the work of social scientists but also from the insights and analyses of community residents, leaders, and organizations.

One of the students who researched implementation of MPP, the “Remain in Mexico” policy, in El Paso, Kathryn Garcia, writes:

Working with Hope Border Institute and participating in the NSF REU changed me not only as a student, but as a person as well.... Most of the individuals whom I worked alongside at Hope were from El Paso. They had a greater understanding of the particular challenges within the El Paso/Ciudad Juárez region and welcomed research not for the sake of academic knowledge but to bring about policy change.

### LEARNING THROUGH COLLABORATIVE EXPERIENCES

Table 1 summarizes the range of collaborative projects that students and community organizations have conducted. As mentioned above, the context for this program has been one of rapidly changing, complex legal procedures. One of our main activities has been to try and make sense of such changes and provide migrants with advice on what they mean—despite the difficulty of gaining access to immigration courts, the frequent change in court hearings schedules, and the lack of information on official websites. Daily attendance at asylum hearings in El Paso or at the Operation Streamline cases in Las Cruces gave students firsthand experience of the

injustices migrants face. Student presence also allowed them to hear the off hand statements of judges in ways that revealed their indifference to migrants' experiences and aspirations.

For example, Daniel Avitia helped document asylum hearings for Hope Border Institute in the summer of 2019 and assisted in creating a flow-chart of pathways to asylum or its denial. Although government information on how the asylum process should work in theory is not easily accessible, observers in the courts can see parts of the process as it is experienced. Avitia writes:

observing behavior and interactions from a judge presiding over the El Paso Processing Center (EPPC) immigration court, we documented the following:

- “When we have the exotics is when we have fun” (Referring to defendants who need a translator for a language that is not Spanish or English).
- “Only 5% get asylum, but it’s better than playing the lottery.”

These comments represent the biases of a judge who, while laughing and speaking English without having a translator communicate his jokes, was cryptically exchanging words with his colleagues while also assuming that he was not understood by the “exotics.”

Being physically present also allows students to contrast their own experiences with the portrayal of migrants and their advocates often found in the mainstream media. For example, Alondra Aca Garcia writes of her visit to a migrant shelter in Ciudad Juárez in June 2019. She was accompanying one of the staff of Hope Border Institute to educate asylum seekers about their rights under MPP. This and similar efforts were reported in some newspapers as a suspicious attempt to “coach” the migrants on how to cheat the system. She writes:

We walked into a small office where we waited for a while. Edith (the representative from Hope Border Institute) introduced the research group and asked if we could talk to migrants waiting at the church, which by now had been transformed into a shelter... Wanting to explain the asylum process and hold screening interviews was part of this meeting. Having clearly mentioned that we were not giving legal advice nor that anyone in the group



were legal attorneys, we carried out our interviews for that morning. After having interviewed the migrants and explaining their rights to them, we left.

Aca Garcia then asks an important question for all researchers and advocates: “Seeing the distortion of our training in the media was overwhelming and frankly disturbing, given that we had been portrayed as some kind of ‘criminals.’ Since when is informing people of their rights a crime?”

Another benefit of engaging in community-based research is that it can change or complicate perceptions of political activism. Rather than assuming that all community organizations share the same strategies and aspirations, it is important to recognize how complex is the resistance to anti-immigrant policies. For example, to what extent must local organizations accept the large presence of ICE and CBP in their communities while trying to hold them accountable for documented violations of civil rights? Does such a stance contradict the demand to end militarization and defund such agencies? These are the kinds of questions that Nancy Mateo raised when participating with the Border Network for Human Rights (BNHR) in the summer of 2018. Based on her experience in the program, she argued:

At a time when there is a national call for defunding of police, which includes enforcement agencies like Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and Customs and Border Patrol (CBP), how do we reconcile two opposing objectives: improving relations and shutting down detention centers? The ideas clash and cannot possibly coexist. My greatest takeaway from my participation in this program is that solutions to border enforcement and immigration policies must extend beyond negotiations with politicians and enforcement agencies.

The program encouraged students to pay attention to daily events, such as the words spoken in immigration court, the way that informational meetings can be misrepresented in the media, or by participant observation in community-led protests. Students were required to keep field notes in which they documented not only their activities but also their feelings and changing perspectives. The importance of field notes is described here by Ava McElhone Yates, who worked with the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU)’s Regional Center for Border Rights in Las Cruces in the summer of 2019:

In these field notes, I can see my own thought process and confidence develop, writing one week into the program that the court observation process was “uncomfortable but okay because we were clearly part of a class” and, by the end of the program, that I felt I could “confidently convey our research and why it matters” to a variety of audiences including the county Sheriff and a Department of Homeland Security grant analyst in a series of self-initiated interviews.

## CONCLUSIONS

This chapter has described the benefits of CBPR for the study of forced migration, specifically the difficulties faced by migrants in the Paso del Norte region of the U.S.-Mexico borderlands. Students’ testimonies highlight some of the successful research projects they carried out while also highlighting the connections to local organizations and people affected by U.S. border enforcement policies. Connecting students in real time to the issues they study creates a rich learning environment. While each experience is unique, at least three main lessons are shared by participants in this program, which may offer ideas for similar initiatives from universities and colleges.

First, students find that CBPR is a supportive framework for documenting the social impacts of immigration policy. Being connected to local advocacy groups in mutually agreed-upon projects helps students see first-hand how complex and rapidly changing policies require adaptability in the face of unfolding challenges.

Second, participating in hands-on research like this requires the discipline to concentrate on daily events and details that are easily overlooked. We require students to write a daily field journal to document not only their activities but also their feelings and interpretations. These journals became vital resources for preparing conference presentations and writing papers. They also serve as an important record of the damages created by the Trump presidency along the border.

Third, the experience of completing a research project is enhanced by the meaningful contributions that students make to promoting immigrant rights. This can be achieved in a wide variety of ways, such as court observation manuals and Know Your Rights trainings for asylum seekers, as well as several presentations at academic conferences and the annual REU Symposium organized by the Council on Undergraduate Research (CUR).

In sum, programs such as ours can help students not only to become more knowledgeable about immigration policy, but also to empower them to advocate for change in collaboration with community organizations. In the process, students learn to adapt to new circumstances, reflect closely on their experiences, and create concrete tools that migrants and activists can use in the ongoing struggle for immigrant rights.

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PART III

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## Reimagining Space and Spaces



# Lessons Learned from Refugee Camps: From Fetishizing Design to Researching, Drawing, and Co-Producing

*Ayham Dalal*

In April 2021, I received an email from a student seeking help and advice to complete his bachelor's degree in architecture at a German university. He asked, "In your opinion, and as an expert, how does one design a better refugee camp?" He shared an extensive table where he broke down the various dimensions of a camp into categories (security, participation, fences, shelter, etc.)—an approach that is widely common in architectural schools and used to unpack the complexities of an urban space. I could not think of a good answer. I was trying to be diplomatic and careful, but eventually I could not. I asked him, "Why do you want to design a better camp? Camps are like prisons where people are contained and trapped for an unknown period of time. Where people are managed like objects and squeezed into small spaces. It is like a prison where people are controlled. Do you want to design a prison?" I was aware of my exaggerated tone, but I saw it as necessary to challenge the assumption that designing is always the correct solution, no matter the problem.

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The notion of power is often addressed in universities, but is seldom an area of focus within architectural curricula. This is because architects are expected to excel in providing creative and aesthetically pleasing solutions to customers. We are so focused on the solutions that sometimes we forget to ask: For whom is this being built, and for what purpose? How do our designs affect society and empower or disempower certain groups within it? The focus is the design—this is what the architect sells. The issues with this design-based approach become more apparent when architects aim to tackle the refugee “problem.” The questions that are rarely asked are: Do we always need to build? And if we are not wielding our pens and papers to design, what can architects and planners do?

In this chapter I show how a design-oriented approach can be harmful for shifting the attention from refugees’ needs and complex realities toward producing “successful” and “innovative” solutions as determined by the expectations of the field of architecture. To illustrate this point, I will give several examples from workshops and seminars tackling urban and spatial issues regarding refugees. As a successful model and counterpoint, I will show how a successful process includes the active involvement of refugees, and a collaborative approach toward fulfilling their needs. Additionally, I will illustrate how a research-oriented approach to architectural design can be very powerful and has the capacity to raise awareness about the complex spatial realities that refugees face in exile. To do so, examples from studios and design workshops conducted in refugee camps in Jordan and Berlin will be presented. Finally, I will re-emphasize the last point, by giving further examples from a seminar I taught to students in the Urban Studies program at Vassar College.

## ARCHITECTURE AND REFUGEES

Historically speaking, the involvement of architects with refugee issues was limited to their role in spatial practice and design around issues of shelter. Ian Davis, at Oxford University, for instance, engaged his students in the 1970s in the challenges of shelter design. One of his main suggestions was the need to shift from designing shelter as a product to thinking about the process of *sheltering* where local materials and labor markets need to be deployed (Davis 1977). Although Davis continued to be involved in matters of shelter design with humanitarian actors and relief agencies (Davis 2011), in general, architects were frequently pushed to the margin in humanitarian circles. “People laugh at me here. I sometimes

question the validity of what we learned in university,” confessed a site planner in a refugee camp, working at United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). “Our knowledge seems invalid,” he continued. This prevailing sentiment has been explored in the work of Tom Scott-Smith (2017, 67), who points out the “humanitarian-architect” division where “humanitarians are minded to see architects as utopian dreamers, completely out of touch with the realities of the field and the needs of beneficiaries.” This explains why the words “architecture” and “architectural” are mentioned only once or twice in humanitarian catalogs like *Shelter After Disaster* or the *Sphere Handbook* (see Breeze 2020).

However, architecture and urban studies can play important roles in understanding refugees’ multifaceted experiences. The movement of populations across the globe due to wars, conflicts, lack of resources, environmental hardship, or what can be described as a “massive loss of habitat” (Sassen 2016) results in the production of new types of urban spaces by refugees. Displaced populations contribute to the production of cities, the urbanization of camps, and the appropriation of neighborhoods in which they live. They bring different types of spatial knowledge into the new environment in which they find themselves. Yet a nuanced understanding of refugee spaces is still lacking. According to Romola Sanyal, “refugee spaces are emerging as quintessential geographies of the modern, yet their intimate and everyday spatialities remain under-explored.” Architecture as a discipline can play an important role in this process (2014, 558). To highlight this point, I will illustrate case studies in which a design-oriented approach to refugee space proves problematic, and others where an architecturally and politically informed research-oriented approach seems to harness better results and empower refugees in their context. I will begin with the design-oriented approach.

### A DESIGN-ORIENTED APPROACH IN AL-HUSN REFUGEE CAMP IN JORDAN

In 2016, while I was working with the Department of International Urbanism and Design (Habitat Unit) at the Technische Universität (TU) in Berlin, Germany, my colleagues and I were invited to conduct a workshop in Al-Husn camp in Jordan, where 25,000 Palestinian refugees have lived since 1967. The prolongation of exile has gradually transformed the camp from a set of temporary shelters into an urban environment. The



hosting institution was the GIZ (the German Agency for International Cooperation), which was then collaborating with UNRWA (The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East) on a project concerning the Greening of Refugee Camps. The need for greening camps came out of the CIP (Camp Improvement Program), a pilot project introduced in refugee camps for the first time, aiming to upgrade their urban structures (Hanafi and Misselwitz 2010). The design studio we put together consisted of about fifteen master's students enrolled in the Department of Architecture at the TU Berlin and about fifteen undergraduate students from the University of Petra in Jordan, who participated during the workshop only. During the workshop, the students were first welcomed by GIZ, who funded the project, and were introduced to four initiatives that were run by different CBOs (Community Based Organizations), and which received funding to implement greening projects in the camp.

In that context, and as architects, we were asked to suggest how these urban initiatives can be developed and expanded further. In other words, the design studio was meant to function as a “think tank” for GIZ and the funded initiatives. This design-oriented approach prevented us from fully understanding the context and, instead, stuck us in the middle of an established web of power relations, where our position was the “provider of solutions.” Although we were introduced earlier to the camp and the CBOs, we knew little about the internal politics of these CBOs and the motivations for their initiatives. The short schedule of the workshop (10 days) made the design-oriented approach very challenging. Groups of students were meant to support the CBOs in their initiatives, but, in effect, they hindered CBOs' efforts because they were seen as support that no one had asked for. As we came to understand later, none of the CBOs was actually interested in “greening,” the main focus of our project. As one refugee woman on the periphery of the camp explained: “Who are these people [CBOs], I never heard of them, and no, they haven't done anything for us here.”

Trapped between GIZ, who invited us, and the CBO leaders, who played along but had very little interest in design, we were expected to “produce” and to serve an already established agreement between GIZ and the local CBOs. We also felt the urge to “design something” for refugees and thus accomplish something positive. Moreover, many of the areas of intervention and project development were selected earlier and imposed on the camp. The area around a girls' school was to be “greened,” and an

empty area on the periphery of the camp was also to be improved by planting a garden. When attempting to do a quick workshop with girls at the school, their first objection was: “but we don’t want to have a garden here. The boys will come from outside and destroy it.” Similarly, while sitting with one of the committee members in the camp management, the students were frustrated; he looked at the plans with suspicion. “We can’t open the park at night,” he commented. “This park should stay closed, as the neighbors wouldn’t like it to be a place for unwanted naughtiness at night.” The fetishization of architects as doers, solution-finders, and beautifiers clashed with the reality of the space. Surely, this is not the first experience within the context of architectural education where designing fails, but it is important to ask: When should architects refrain from interfering and let go? When is it better not to engage their architectural capacities? It even urges us to ask: Can we really believe that architectural design can provide “universal solutions” that could be parachuted everywhere and anytime? Would architecture really work amid a set of hidden power relations that might be prevalent in a certain place (see Al-Nammari 2013)?

My argument here is not to avoid designing. Rather, my aim is to always be aware of the political contours and powers through which design operates, and to ensure that the architectural imagination can be helpful and offer creative solutions to communities in need. In another workshop in Jerash camp, the results were exactly the opposite. The CBOs needed support, and the designs were implemented as first steps toward anticipated funding. Both the CBO and the community in the camp saw the designs as a source of empowerment. Many of the conducted projects within that context were embraced by the community and developed further. Thus, a design-oriented approach can be useful when it seeks to empower refugees and fulfill their daily needs and expectations. It works when refugees express their need for support, rather than outsiders assuming what their needs are. Also, in contrast to Al-Husn camp, which is more urbanized, Jerash camp is more impoverished. The inhabitants there are ex-Gazan refugees who have limited rights in Jordan (Al-Husseini 2010). Because of that, the government enforced restrictions on the built environment; use of concrete slabs was limited (to avoid permanence), and zinc roofs are very common.

Some of the suggested projects were designed to deal with these obstacles. For instance, the students developed a low-budget water heating system and insulation system that were applauded and praised by the refugee community in the camp (see Fig. 1). This shows that a design-oriented



**Fig. 1** A simple system for heating water and insulating the zinc roofs developed specifically for and with refugees in Jerash camp (Source: Students of TU Berlin, 2016)

approach within the refugee context can be indeed beneficial and powerful, but *only* when it responds to urgent issues and demands coming from within the refugee community itself, and when the approach is not imposed on them by external institutions or actors. At times, these impositions can come from architectural schools, or from architects who want to “prove” that their ideas can serve the community.

An example of that is an “innovative” tent that a local architect designed for refugees. The design was for a weaving technique that would allow rainwater to be stored on the outer surface of the tent, while also preserving solar energy. As “innovative” as this design might appear, it overlooks the main challenge: a refugee tent is a suspension of the individual’s “right to dwell” (see Dalal 2022; Dalal et al. 2021a, b), putting them in a state of permanent temporariness (instead of just providing shelter for a few days). It gradually oppresses people’s everyday need for privacy and forces families to live together in one single space for an unknown period of time.



**Fig. 2** Workshop between the students and the refugee community in Jerash camp (Source: Author, 2015)

In contrast to a design-oriented approach that tends to overlook refugees' needs and demands, I suggest that a research-oriented and politically informed practice is much more powerful when working in a refugee context, as shown by an example from a research-based studio conducted in Berlin (Fig. 2).

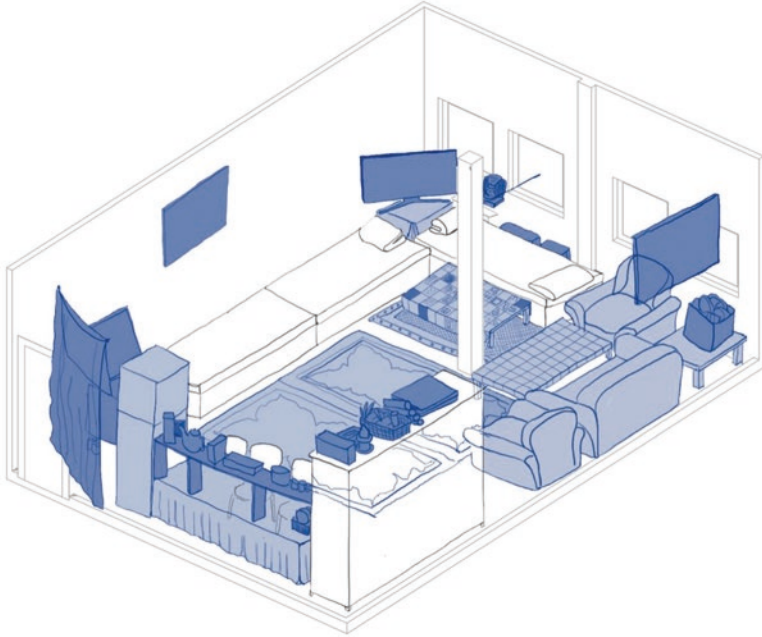
### A RESEARCH-ORIENTED APPROACH IN TEMPOHOMES (BERLIN)

Architects do not always prioritize social or cultural knowledge of a particular space, because architecture is perceived as an artistic practice. As more and more architects become engaged with this kind of research, however, it is worth shedding light on the importance of this understanding within the context of refugee housing.

In 2018, LAF (the State Office for Refugee Affairs in Berlin) approached us, asking for feedback regarding their design of “Tempohomes,” new types of refugee camps built specifically for Berlin. For students to sign up for the research-oriented studio, they had to provide drawings and sketches that illustrated their analytical skills. Many of their initial design ideas and drawings revealed “stereotypical” judgments of refugees or homeless people. These early drawings reflected superficial observations and knowledge of people who appeared very “different” or were living under “precarious conditions.”

The research-based seminar began by teaching students about research methods developed in the social sciences, such as semi-structured interviews, participatory observations, and walk-along interviews. During the study, the students applied these methods to understand better how refugees “live” in the containers of the Tempohomes, which are similar to the containers used on construction sites. “We are always asked to make drawings, but not usually asked to explain them in writing,” I said, while showing the students slides of how they can structure an argument by writing—something architecture students might never learn in a class. We were able to produce an elaborate report about Tempohomes: their spatial structure, how they are used and experienced by refugees, and how refugees appropriated the space. “This is the first time I have done something like that,” commented one of the students. “Research allowed me to understand better what refugees endure in these containers. Things I would have never imagined.”

In contrast to a design-oriented approach, a research-oriented approach for architects in the refugee context allows them to use their spatial analytical skills to understand what can be a complex setting. They can then recognize the powers at play and the impact of the design, before suggesting a design of their own. As one student commented, “refugees suffer from the materiality of this container, they are too hot in summer and very cold at night!” A research-oriented approach to the refugee issue allows architectural students to empathize with refugees, to make connections to their own experiences and struggles instead of making uninformed judgments. It also contextualizes their skills and knowledge and leads them to make politically informed decisions. Students’ sharpened insights became apparent during their discussions with the State Office for Refugee Affairs. “They don’t like to hear that their design is not good,” one student noticed. The students became aware not only of the power of their observations and analytical drawings, but also of their impact on the politics of



**Fig. 3** A visual documentation of how a refugee family utilizes space in a Tempohome container (Source: Antonia Noll and Christina Hartl, 2018)

refugee accommodation at large. “When is our report going to be published?” many of the students demanded, even as debates with the LAF continued, delaying publication (Fig. 3).<sup>1</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Finally, I would like to emphasize that these conversations need not wait until students reach graduate school. Critical, informed conversations about the role of design and designers can, and must, happen in the undergraduate classroom as well. In a Spring 2021 seminar on Refugees and

<sup>1</sup>Eventually, the report was published as a book under the title *Tempohomes: Untersuchung sozial-räumlicher Aneignungspraktiken von Geflüchteten in ausgewählten Berliner Gemeinschaftsunterkünften* by the Berlin University Press in 2022.

Urban Space taught digitally to a dozen students at Vassar College, I took advantage of the remote format imposed on us by the pandemic to bring a much wider variety of speakers to class than would normally be possible. The course asked students to explore how refugees contribute to urbanization processes and can reshape the ways neighborhoods are built. Temporary shelter and camp spaces host clashes between the different visions and needs of local officials, humanitarian agencies, and newly arrived residents looking to establish a sense of home in an often-permanent but always precarious space. One student, reflecting on the experience of hearing speakers' insights on collaborations with refugees and camp officials, noted that she was able to understand, and hold in tension, the clean lines of designs and diagrams with the "messiness of human cooperation." Given that refugees, camp officials, and designers may arrive with very different experiences, expectations, and ways of talking and working, it is important that students and burgeoning designers and researchers be prepared to challenge their assumptions and explore new perspectives in the undergraduate classroom.

Another student commented that this class was an important one, unlike any other he had taken at Vassar:

Ayham once spoke about how the course, which gathered students across several disciplines at Vassar, required that he and the students meet in the middle in terms of the media we used. Accustomed to working with TU Berlin students who had a firm grasp on architectural visualization, Ayham had to continually adapt the syllabus to engage liberal arts students, many of whom had far more experience writing than drawing. He never surrendered the value of thinking about the spatial-technical arenas of displacement through visuals and graphics, but he encouraged deliverables that put texts in conversation with other tools and media (e.g. architectural practices, mapping, archival work) to make use of our strengths. A thorough and exact syllabus Ayham had offered at the start of the semester gave way to a course that we had created collectively and iteratively. I got the sense from Ayham that it would be a shame for camp studies to be consumed by the technical, or become the domain solely of architects and planners, and the shape of our class resisted just that possibility.

Returning to the anecdote that opened this chapter, the experience of taking a research-oriented, multidisciplinary approach to refugee shelter and housing might have prevented the student from asking, "how to design a better camp," and might have prompted him to instead wonder,



“what can we architects do to make refugees’ lives better in these camps?” While the first question is a provocation that revolves around a naïve attempt to “fix problems” out there through designs, the second one is informed by the political and existential struggles of refugees in camps and urban areas. This second framing prompts a much larger challenge: “How can architectural education and practice contribute to redressing the spatial injustices and inequalities we witness around us?”

We need design. The world cannot go without it. Imagination, creativity, and fantasy are needed to make the world enjoyable. Yet we also need to think about the impact of such provocations and designs, especially on people who struggle to meet daily needs and secure basic human rights. Research, although not common among architects, is a way to bring the students closer to complex realities. We must encourage future practitioners to unpack, question, and understand complex matters, and make their designs well-informed about the entangled web of relations, hardships, and opportunities in which refugees and other marginalized and colonized populations find themselves.

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# The Archaeology of Forced Migration in Greece: A Layered Pedagogy

*Kostis Kourelis*

How does the academic teaching of archaeology in the United States respond to the urgent questions surrounding this migration to Europe? The ad hoc urbanism of Greece's migrant camps offers a rich entry point for the study of contemporary migration and its relationship to historical landscapes. Since its foundation in 1830, modern Greece has experienced continuous episodes of forced migration, emigration, internal displacement, war, economic collapse, destruction, abandonment, and ruination. Its countryside is layered with migrant sites, artifacts, and memories. Starting in the seventeenth century, European intellectuals valorized the Greek landscape as an idyllic Arcadia that was central to Western civilization's relationship to nature. Representing universal values, Greece's antiquities stand as foils to the mutability and degeneration of modernity and form the subject of archaeology as a discipline.

How can Greek archaeology, a science devoted to giving physical testimony to an idealized West, be redeployed toward the study of modern migration? Classical archaeology was born as a modern discipline to legitimize colonialist, nationalist, and racial projects that continue to tarnish its

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reputation in the twenty-first century (Dyson 2006). In response, New Archaeology or Processual Archaeology recalibrated the discipline toward the study of nonelite populations, social forces, ecology, and less prestigious historical periods. Modern migration came into focus as processual archaeologists partnered with ethnographers to study the recent past (Sutton 1988). By the early 2000s, a mature subfield on the archaeology of the contemporary had fully emerged, with a self-conscious focus on contemporary conflict, forensics, and human rights advocacy (González Ruibal 2018).

In spite of these innovations in a diachronic and multifaceted Greek archaeology, the primacy of the classical dominates how American students encounter the modern country. Classical studies, ancient history, philosophy, philology, and art continue to be the academic gateways through which students discover Greece and pursue study-abroad opportunities. Approximately 5000 American students travel to Greece every year, making it the 14th most popular country for foreign travel (U.S. Embassy 2019). In recent calls to decolonize the syllabus, the Greek curriculum faces an additional motivation to accept migration studies. Neglecting to incorporate the material culture of migration into archaeology's concerns risks turning the study of Greece into an antiquated warehouse for racial supremacists and reactionary agendas. During the twentieth century, Greece was central to Europe's geopolitical struggles over the Eastern Question that contributed to the two Balkan Wars, the two World Wars, the Greek Civil War, the Cold War, the collapse of the Eastern bloc, and the ensuing civil wars in Yugoslavia. State funding and support from private foundations allowed archaeology to generate the social, linguistic, and geographic expertise that Western powers could use in the production of cultural capital (Davis and Vogeikoff-Brogan 2013). Spies and archaeologists came through the same circles, training, and curriculum (Heuck 2011). The U.S. government's active participation in warfare in Greece after World War II (from the experimental use of napalm during the 1946–49 civil war, to supporting the country's 1967–74 military junta) entangled academics. Understandably, American archaeologists have steered away from excavating modern sites that would highlight such complicity. The archaeology of ancient democracy safely distances Americans from recent entanglements, while promoting an ahistorical self-identification of modern America with ancient Athens.

American students have been excavating in Greece since 1881; their continued engagement in the field today raises new questions of ethics, responsibilities, and global citizenship. Archaeological engagement with contemporary migration can contextualize the politics of the twentieth century and, more importantly, introduce conflicts between present-day local and global international relations. In 2015, massive forced displacement revealed an important tension between inclusive and exclusive archaeological practices. Students who traveled to Greece to experience an idealized classical landscape encountered 60,000 refugees desperately occupying the real contemporary landscape. Carrying out fieldwork on a deserted village in the mountains of central Greece, my students at Franklin & Marshall College watched a humanitarian crisis unfold in real time. As one of the central news items of the decade, the European migration crisis had percolated to the top of the students' worldview and demanded a fundamental reconsideration of Greece's role in the American curriculum (Brenningmeyer et al. 2021).

Teachers and scholars involved with study-abroad programs in Greece responded in a variety of ways to the humanitarian crisis. Under the direction of comparative literature professor Karen Emmerich (2020), students at Princeton volunteered at the Katsikas refugee camp through European NGO Lighthouse Relief. Brown University students working with Yannis Hamilakis et al. (2020) curated material culture produced by the refugees of Moria, Lesbos, in the exhibition *Transient Matter*. Rachel Kidney (2020) worked on illegal squats in Athens as part of the Architectures of Displacement program at Oxford University. Jan Sanders (2018), program director of Arcadia University in Greece collaborated with director of the Athens Poetry Center A. E. Stallings (2018), Bucknell University classics professor Stephanie Larson (Lavelle 2016), and many others to provide material support for the 300–500 refugees occupying an abandoned high school in Athens. When the Greek police evacuated the premises of the Fifth School Squat in September 2019, the team continued to support the migrant group in their relocation to a military base in Corinth. All curricular responses were situational by necessity. Since the Greek Army oversaw the management of refugees, no formal institutional relationship was permitted with any foreign institution. This included Greek academics and their students, as well as the Department of Social Anthropology of the University of the Aegean, whose campus was located on the Island of Lesbos. Albeit unofficial, Franklin & Marshall's response was guided by an informal network of Greek and American educators who were pushing the limits of their institutions to carry out this work.

## REMOTE SENSING

In the summer of 2015, an unprecedented flight of refugees in the Mediterranean quickly became a humanitarian disaster. Some 60,000 migrants who had crossed the Aegean Sea with the hope of traveling on to Western European countries were stuck in Greece, as the Balkan states closed their borders. The Greek government then created detainment camps scattered through the Greek countryside. In the summer of 2017, the UNHCR reported the location of seventy-five such camps (fifty-six on the Greek mainland and nineteen on Aegean Islands), conveying public information that the Greek state had provided. Although heavily controlled by the Greek Army and Police, the detainment camps were visible on national and local news, social media, and satellite images. A student could triangulate spatial clues from online photographs with Google Earth's cartographic images and make visible an architectural reality that authorities on the ground were trying to hide. Undergraduate students at Franklin & Marshall's campus in Lancaster, PA, 5000 miles from Greece, could engage in a form of humanitarian watch while learning technical skills of digital mapping. In the 2000s, a "spatial turn" in pedagogy had changed the teaching of history with exemplary projects like the Holocaust Geographies Collaborative (co-founded at Middlebury College) that mapped the piecemeal development of Auschwitz (Knowles et al. 2014).

In 2015, American academics had three alternatives: to ignore it and continue with business as usual, to address it through civic engagement (fundraising, volunteering, etc.), or to redirect specific disciplinary tools toward studying the crisis. The third approach was embraced by Franklin & Marshall. The study-abroad strategies developed by the college involved two summer research programs in Greece (2016 and 2018, funded by the Hackman Summer Scholars program) and two new Art History courses: *Migration Architecture: Introduction to Spatial Analysis* (ART 175, Fall 2017) and *Syria: Spaces of Resistance* (ART 375, Spring 2018). They were accompanied by a campus-wide conversation over the curriculum of forced migration. Participating faculty developed a co-taught Forced Migration Seminar directed by Giovanna Faleschini-Lerner in International Studies (IST 200, Spring 2019). Franklin & Marshall's interdisciplinary and collaborative approach benefited from the wisdom of Maria Höhn and conversations with the Consortium on Forced Migration, Displacement, and Education at Vassar College.

An important point of reference for the archaeological fieldwork was Jason de León (2015), who witnessed a similar crossing of contemporary migrants through his Mesoamerican excavation in Mexico during his PhD research. He responded with the Undocumented Migration Project, an archaeological survey of the U.S.-Mexico border through the Sonoran Desert. We decided to develop a digital archaeology that expanded its scope to include the Cold War campus of the Voice of America, villages destroyed by Nazi atrocities, and refugee camps (Brenningmeyer et al. 2020; Kourelis 2018a). The chosen tool was “counter-forensics,” a notion informed by photographer Allan Sekula and elaborated by Thomas Keenan, director of the Human Rights Program at Bard College (Keenan 2014). Our intentional reversal of power turned the totalistic view of Google Earth and other surveillance structures into critical tools. The strategy applied by students to Greek refugee camps has been inspired by the heftier digital toolkit of Forensic Architecture, the initiative created by Eyal Weizman (2017) at Goldsmith’s, University of London, that investigates crimes against humanity through spatial modeling. In contrast to the nuanced technical applications of Forensic Architecture, the data on Greek refugee camps were free, as was all the software students used. Our much simpler Forensic Architecture taught lessons on the politics of spatial data, democracy, activism, witnessing, and media transparency.

The use of satellite images to prospect sites is a standard investigative tool in the landscape archaeology of ancient periods. The University of Pennsylvania, for example, established the Cultural Heritage and Armed Conflict Data Resources, a geo-referenced database of cultural heritage destruction between 1989 and 2016. Building on the university’s long history of archaeological fieldwork in Mesopotamia, the Penn Cultural Heritage Center focused on the wars in Iraq and Syria and used multiple strategies for research, including the exhibition that paired contemporary and ancient objects, featured sponsored preservation projects in war zones, and commissioned Syrian artist Issam Kourbaj to create sculptural installations (Kourelis 2018b). While on display over the spring, summer, and fall 2018 semesters, field trips to *Cultures in the Crossfire* at Penn enriched the classroom experience for the students at Franklin & Marshall. The public art and history studio project Monument Lab had also just assembled a robust program of public arts interventions. It included Michael Rakowitz’s *Radio Silence*, which partnered Philadelphia’s Iraqi community with its returning veterans from the war in Iraq (Farber and Lum 2019). Both released in 2018, the Penn Cultural Heritage Center and Monument Lab

showed students the interdisciplinary and creative fringes of digital practices. In the classroom, students carried out a narrower analytical exercise of data from a country they had never visited, but whose refugee coverage was filling their media space.

Remote sensing is a technical field of archaeological research that assumes spatial distance. In the study of refugees and asylum seekers, there is an additional remoteness of observational access. Under national and international laws, the migrant population of Greece can only be studied remotely. The police tightly prohibit photographing, recording, interviewing, or socializing with migrants whose legal status is in limbo. Although the chain-link fences around Greek refugee camps are porous, lawful interaction is limited. American students can access the detained populations only as volunteers in one of the many (and predominantly European) NGOs granted access to specific camps, but that comes with a minimum six-week commitment typically required by volunteering contracts. The mapping of camp installations does not directly confront individuals or capture data of a private nature. Rather, it studies the institutional infrastructure constructed by the state to house stateless populations who are not involved in constructing those installations. The mapping of such sites includes recording elements that preceded arrival of the camp, such as the natural environment (flora, fauna, streams, topography) and earlier human settlement (farm ruins, abandoned military buildings, road infrastructure, water and electrical utilities, fencing, debris, signs, legal ownership, etc.).

Within architectural studies, there is a strong tradition of collaborative documentation and cartography; it is best seen in the architectural curriculum of Manuel Herz at ETH in Zurich, which mapped the social spaces of Western Sahara's camps (Herz 2013). Such studies, however, focus on long-term camps that have become permanent, including Dadaab in Kenya, which opened in 1992 and houses over 200,000 residents (Rawlence 2016), or more recently Za'atari in Jordan, which opened in 2012 to host Syrian refugees temporarily and now houses 80,000 people. At Za'atari, the Rochester Institute of Technology, moreover, developed a special GIS that empowered residents to map their own facilities. The RefuGIS project was funded by the UNHCR and highlights the greatest potential in collaborative research (Tomaszewski 2018; and see the following chapter in this book).

The library of past images (cataloged in Google Earth) creates a diachronic view of a landscape that can be visually studied for any change. Although many of the Greek camps were placed on military property, the

reused bases had been abandoned (demilitarized after the Cold War) and were therefore not classified as sensitive. Scrolling through the time signatures of multiple images, the researcher can reconstruct the architectural evolution of all the sites. A researcher can also trust that events occurring in the present will be posted in a subsequent satellite image three to twelve months in the future. The high degree of resolution and the frequency of updated coverage provide a nuanced record of a refugee camp, as it horizontally occupies a clear and visible territory. Modeling the evolution of a contemporary refugee camp almost in real time (with a six-month lag) not only brought those contemporary events to life for the twelve students in the class, but also created a critical framework to consider how online cartographic data are collected and used in daily life. Counter-forensics takes the data that we passively consume as users while navigating in our cars or planning a holiday and turns it into activism. The digital tools were admittedly limited by how much could be learned by nonspecialized undergraduates in one semester. Those lessons could not compare with the procedures developed by grant-funded graduate programs, but provided a sufficiently critical framework and participated in the production of scholarship.

### HUMANIZING THE DIGITAL

In Greece, remote sensing provided topographical clarity of camps from the sky, but elements needed to be verified through observation or what remote-sensing archaeologists call “ground truthing.” Recording a camp during its use as shelter for refugees was impossible due to the Greek government’s vigilant policing, but we discovered that the makeshift preparations created a displacement among many sites, leaving them open to investigation before, after, or in-between occupation. We tracked the forced movement of one refugee group in Thessaly and discovered that, within one year, there were four involuntary dislocations. Summer travel and fieldwork was limited by the short window of opportunity, June and July, when students could be in Greece. During our fieldwork, some sites became unoccupied, and we could inspect them in person (Kourelis 2020). Back in the classroom, the intersection of terrestrial visual data gathered in the field with aerial visual data extracted from Google Earth enabled us to test the limits of technology while producing a factual record.

The methodology of remote sensing and digital mapping lacks a fundamental engagement with the human beings who live in those spaces. We side-stepped the limitations of access by working with migrant and refugee



populations who had left the camps and moved to apartments in Athens. We collaborated with Melissa Network, a solidarity organization for migrant and refugee women, founded in 2014 to provide a voluntary communal hub. Melissa Network is housed in a townhouse near Victoria Square, in the heart of Athens' immigrant community. Incidentally, this beautiful house had been built by Russian refugees in the 1920s. Here, migrant women from multiple countries of origin support each other, take Greek and English language lessons, use psychological services, receive child care and communal meals, and attend seminars. Franklin & Marshall student Nancy Le, who had participated in the remote sensing class back in Lancaster, organized a two-day workshop on the meaning of home. With the assistance of Melissa Network's co-founder, the anthropologist Nadina Christodoulou, we invited participants to reflect on housing experiences during their long journeys. Workshop participants were born in Afghanistan, had grown up as refugees in Iran, and had travelled through Turkey, crossed the Aegean at Lesvos to be asylum-seekers in Greece. Le and I shared our personal experiences—as children of Vietnamese refugees in Los Angeles and Greek immigrants in Philadelphia, respectively—and brainstormed on the past and future of “home.” The workshop was a conversation of mutual learning that articulated in human terms what it was like to live in the refugee camps studied remotely by those who had temporarily inhabited them. The following summer, Le joined another Franklin & Marshall professor, Eric Hirsch, to study climate refugees in Peru. Hirsch also established the Environmental Migration Lab on campus, which collected narratives of migration from the substantial community of migrants in Lancaster (a city that the BBC called the refugee capital of the United States in 2017). The Environmental Migration Lab built on the ethnography of Lancaster photographer Kristin Rehder, (2017) whose project was exhibited at both Franklin & Marshall and Vassar Colleges. Finally, the conversation between European and American migration was sharpened through an artist residency program funded by the Richard C. von Hess Foundation. Franklin & Marshall hosted students, artists, and archaeologists of the Undocumented Migration Project were in residence for a week and installed *Hostile Terrain*, a multimedia exhibition at our college's Phillips Museum of Art (Cahill et al. 2019).

## CONCLUSION

Mapping the contemporary refugee camps on the Greek landscape redirects our scholarly attention toward the longer Mediterranean history of forced migration across centuries. Below the walls of the Athenian Acropolis lies a series of caves that once housed enslaved African of the Ottoman period who were eventually able to gain their freedom. Known as Black Rocks, these caves did not enter the archaeological narrative when the nation-state removed any postclassical layers from the Acropolis archaeological site. Since classical archaeology removed the testimonies of African and all other forced migrants in Greek history, it is archaeologists' responsibility to recover them. In the classical period, the silver mines of Laurion produced the coinage that made Athens a global superpower. The silver was mined by enslaved individuals. Forced migration has been an inescapable part of modern Greek history since its foundation as a nation-state. After the Greek War of Independence in 1821, refugee camps were built to accommodate internal displacement; we have literary testimony of twelve such camps, but no architectural evidence. One of the camps was founded by American philhellene Samuel Howe and named Washingtonia. The camp's location has been lost, but Franklin & Marshall and Messiah Colleges have joined forces to rediscover it in future fieldschools. Between 1922 and 1929, the U.S. helped finance 2089 refugee settlements to accommodate the 1.2 million refugees from Asia Minor. World War II followed a similar path, with 18% of the Greek population internally displaced. These examples illustrate the rich, little-known heritage of migration that covers the Greek countryside and requires serious academic attention.

As in the 1820s and the 1920s, the 2020s find Greece accommodating dramatic shifts in global population once again. The mapping of contemporary camps reveals their proximity with sites of earlier histories of dislocation and displacement, long erased and forgotten. The contemporary camps will, in turn, be erased and forgotten unless documented today. The American grand tour of undergraduate students has capitalized on the world monuments of classical tourism (Athens, Delphi, Olympia, Corinth, etc.) whose internationality claims universal ownership and global heritage. Greece's more problematic global heritage should not exclude the extraordinary achievements of Western civilization but must include the ordinary sites of global suffering. Even studied remotely, the reckoning with this migration heritage promises to revitalize the archaeology of Greece as a central discipline in the consideration of contemporary crises.

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# Teaching Forced Displacement with Geospatial Technology in Refugee Camps: Lessons from Rwanda and Jordan

*Brian Tomaszewski*

Forced displacement is inherently spatial, with aspects operating at multiple scales. At the individual scale, space shapes a survivor's experience. At the regional scale, space mediates our understanding of global processes of forced displacement and shapes our local responses to these worldwide trends. As long as there has been forced displacement, some form of geographic mapping has been used to understand, represent, and reason about forced displacement. In modern times, mapping technology comes in the form of geospatial technologies that can range from a displaced person using Google Maps on their phone to navigate in an unfamiliar environment as they migrate from their home country, to powerful geographic information systems (GISs) that drive core operations of organizations such as United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), supporting countries hosting refugees and international humanitarian operations.

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The varied spatial aspects of forced displacement combined with geospatial technologies create excellent educational opportunities for a wide range of learners: undergraduate and graduate students, service providers to displaced populations, and displaced people themselves.

In this essay, I describe my experiences developing educational programs using geospatial technology centered on forced displacement in refugee camps. Specifically, I discuss my work of bringing undergraduate students to Rwanda to map refugee camps as well as, in Jordan, building a program to empower refugees to use geospatial technology to map refugee spaces. The experiences in Jordan, in particular, created a broader educational opportunity for virtual learning for my students back in the United States, as well as opportunities for service providers in Jordan to learn about geospatial technology to improve community services. The essay concludes with reflections on these experiences and ideas to consider for educators interested in teaching forced displacement using geospatial technology in refugee camps.

#### RWANDA: MAPPING REFUGEE CAMPS VIA STUDY-ABROAD EXPERIENCE

If one is truly interested in educating students about human-created spaces of forced displacement (like refugee camps), ideally one will be able to visit and experience life inside a refugee camp. However, actually gaining access to a refugee camp can be incredibly difficult. Camps are often closed and heavily militarized, meaning that only nationally recognized NGOs who run the camps have access. It takes time to build relationships with officials from the host country who ultimately decide who can enter a refugee camp. Also, refugee camps are often intensely resource-constrained environments that simultaneously receive many requests from academic practitioners wishing, for example, to do their next theoretical study on forced displacement, but offering nothing of practical value to the organizations who have limited time and resources to operate the camp, thus creating an imbalanced relationship. That imbalance is even greater between the scholars seeking access and the displaced people housed in these camps.

Having worked in Rwanda for several years before making a career shift into forced displacement, I was keenly aware of these issues when I began approaching officials from the Rwandan government about accessing Kigeme refugee camp, which was, as of 2021, home to around 18,000

refugees from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).<sup>1</sup> As a geographer specializing in Geographic Information Science and Technology, I had done background research on geographic mapping of the camp and found that Rwandan officials had limited capacity to use mapping technology to support their camp operations, even though geospatial technologies were well-established in the international humanitarian community. Further, I saw a tremendous opportunity to bring these tools to a wide range of learners that included undergraduate students in the U.S., officials from the Rwandan humanitarian community, and the Congolese refugees themselves. I approached the Rwandan and UNHCR authorities with my idea to bring American college students to Rwanda to map the Kigeme refugee camp in detail as part of a study-abroad experience at my university. The goal was to create a very detailed map of the camp that would go beyond the excellent and important efforts of groups like OpenStreetMap that often map refugee camps by looking at satellite imagery, but do not actually enter the camps to conduct more detailed exploration of the space.<sup>2</sup>

Of course, being on the ground in Rwanda was also an invaluable opportunity to show U.S. undergraduate college students what life is like in refugee camps and to provide them some understanding of the type of spaces created for, and adapted by, refugees. In planning this study trip, I was also very conscious of the valid criticisms that such trips of U.S. college students to Africa can be exploitative in nature.<sup>3</sup> Thus, the study-abroad experience was designed to take into account the needs of Rwandan officials and the refugees themselves, and to make capacity-building and educational opportunities for them, rather than the students, central to the trip. To achieve this goal, the program was designed to use very basic yet effective mapping technologies.<sup>4</sup> Geospatial technologies have been criticized as difficult to master. However, many of the tools have evolved to the point that their technical operations, with proper setup and

<sup>1</sup> United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). “UNHCR Rwanda: Kigeme Refugee Camp Profile (as of April 15, 2021).” ReliefWeb. <https://relief-web.int/report/rwanda/unhcr-rwanda-kigeme-refugee-camp-profile-15-april-2021>.

<sup>2</sup> Missing Maps, <https://www.missingmaps.org/>. Last accessed January 23, 2022.

<sup>3</sup> Ben Gardner and Ron Krabill, “Against the Romance of Study Abroad,” *Africa is a Country*, July 5, 2017, <https://africasacountry.com/2017/07/against-the-romance-of-study-abroad/>.

<sup>4</sup> See Brian Tomaszewski, *Geographic Information Systems for Disaster Management (Second Edition)*, (Oxfordshire and New York, Routledge: 2021).



maintenance, are no more difficult than common tasks people around the world do with their smartphones, such as using Facebook.

I picked this approach for several reasons. First, we did not require participating students to have backgrounds in forced displacement or geospatial technology before traveling to Africa. Second, the geospatial technical capacities of humanitarian professionals in Rwanda were somewhat limited. Thus, it was important that any interventions that we presented could, ideally, be sustained after we left.

In that regard, the program set the following schedule. A total of fifteen students traveled to Rwanda over the winter break for two weeks between two study-abroad trips. During this time, we gathered as much data as possible from the camps using mapping tools. Whenever possible, we created opportunities for the refugees to use mapping tools on smartphones to do the actual mapping in the camp. After the students returned to campus, they were required to take a three-credit semester-long course to process the data into maps and other information products that were then sent back to Rwanda.

Over the course of two study-abroad trips (2016 and 2017), this time frame proved to be generally effective. As project leader, I had to keep up momentum, especially when students got back from Rwanda. All too often, once the thrill of fieldwork and international travel is over, student time and attention move on to the next thing. It is essential to emphasize to the students the reciprocal nature of such an undertaking. They needed to remember the Rwandans who gave their time and resources to enable their educational experience in the camp, as well as to think of the refugees themselves, who can potentially benefit from the mapping intervention.

### JORDAN: THE REFUGEE GEOGRAPHIC INFORMATION SYSTEMS (REFUGIS) PROJECT

After the program in Rwanda, Jordan permitted continued reflection on how best to engage students and affected communities. My work in Jordan focused on the Za'atari refugee camp located in northern Jordan, which was, as of 2021, home to just under 80,000 people.<sup>5</sup> This camp was well-documented, receiving intense media attention at the beginning of

<sup>5</sup>United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, "Zaatari Refugee Camp," Situation Syria Regional Refugee Response. Last modified December 31, 2021. <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria/location/53>.

the Syrian conflict. As I have discussed in several previous publications,<sup>6</sup> on my first visit to Za’atari in 2015, I was struck by how massive the refugee camp was, and, by extension, how essential geospatial technology and mapping were for the practical aspect of understanding space and also how geospatial technology could be used—not so much to educate American students, as to create and represent ideas of space and belonging for the refugees living in Za’atari.

Geospatial technology itself has its own interesting discourse in the operation of the camp. When I initially arrived at the camp, much of the actual mapping was done by an external NGO contracted by international humanitarian providers. This created contested, conflicted aspects of information sharing, and thus competing power relations among the various humanitarian actors in this very large, complicated humanitarian situation. From the beginning I believed that the refugees themselves needed to become actors in the information management of the camp through mastering geospatial technology. When the opportunity arose to apply for funding from the UNHCR Innovation initiative,<sup>7</sup> and working in conjunction with dedicated technicians from the camp’s community services, we were able to create the Refugee Geographic Information Systems project or “RefuGIS.” Now, my students were Syrian refugees themselves, perhaps one of the most creative, innovative, and rewarding groups of students I’ve ever had the pleasure to teach. Over the course of several years, I made numerous trips to Jordan and gave lessons on geospatial technology to refugees. Lessons started with practical topics such as how to operate commercial GIS software, work with spatial data, and create the maps that the humanitarian professionals need for their work. Over time, I began to teach the students more about how they can communicate and represent the space they inhabit. Most notably in this regard, I taught them how to use Esri story maps.<sup>8</sup> Story maps are a way to construct spatial narratives that combine multimedia artifacts such as pictures, videos, geographic maps, text, and more. I guided the refugee partners to create story maps on a wide variety of topics of interest to their lived experiences in the camp: ranging from the experiences of women in the refugee camp

<sup>6</sup> Brian Tomaszewski, “I Teach Refugees to Map Their World,” *The Conversation*, May 18, 2018, <https://theconversation.com/i-teach-refugees-to-map-their-world-94160>.

<sup>7</sup> UNHCR, “Innovation Service,” <https://www.unhcr.org/innovation/>. Last accessed January 23, 2022.

<sup>8</sup> Esri, “ArcGIS StoryMaps,” <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/>. Last accessed January 23, 2022.

to a compelling story about surviving the violence in Syria, coming to the camp, or facing difficult illnesses.<sup>9</sup>

Although I never brought any U.S. college students to Jordan, the overall project created numerous opportunities for my students to learn about the spaces of refugee camps and the lived experiences of the refugees themselves. Specifically, virtual collaboration technologies brought my Jordan students into conversation with my U.S. students. Students in Jordan shared experiences about what life is like in a refugee camp, and all my students bonded over the common ground of studying GIS.

The RefuGIS project continues to prosper. With time now to reflect upon the accomplishments, I see that teaching geospatial technology has shaped how the refugees themselves view and experience the space they live in. The more senior members of the RefuGIS project are now leading much of the initiative. RefuGIS is included in discussions with camp management on spatial topics such as winterization, redevelopment, and any other spatial aspect of the camp that will ultimately require the use of geospatial technology for decision-making.

The innovation created through the refugee project has also had a synergistic effect with other innovation in the camp. Members of the RefuGIS project are now working on projects ranging from robotics to video game development. The technology focus of the RefuGIS project has also enabled several project team members to go on to formal university studies in Jordan related to technology. I was thrilled to hear that the RefuGIS project, which involves several women—a group underrepresented in technology, particularly in the Arab world—inspired other women to pursue careers in educational study in technology, even if not specifically geospatial technology.

## CONCLUSION

Refugee camps offer a unique lens into the construction of space—both the literal construction of physical space, but also the lived experience of space. Geospatial technologies are powerful tools that can represent and provide an analytical framework needed for decision-making that has important effects on the lives of displaced people. Additionally, they are

<sup>9</sup>Brian Tomaszewski, “Helping Syrian refugees share their stories with Esri Story Maps,” *ArcGIS Blog*, August 22, 2019, <https://www.esri.com/arcgis-blog/products/story-maps/sharing-collaboration/helping-syrian-refugees-share-their-stories-with-esri-story-maps/>.

relatively easy to teach on the new platforms that exist. As I discussed in my study-abroad trips in Rwanda, they can provide a practical benefit for educators and humanitarian professionals who may lack the training to use geospatial technology to its fullest extent even though they may be aware of its existence. The combination of these ideas makes geospatial technology an excellent choice for developing educational programs related to forced displacement for college students, humanitarian professionals, and refugees themselves.

However, geospatial technologies certainly cannot provide a complete understanding of forced displacement or life in a refugee camp. The long-standing critique of geospatial technologies as a tool of state interests and surveillance is well taken.<sup>10</sup> If not employed with sensitivity and cultural awareness, geospatial technologies can efface the lived realities of displaced people by abstracting geographic reality to points, lines, and polygons. It can be difficult to capture anyone's sense of "belonging" on a map; this is perhaps an even greater challenge for displaced people. How does one map the meaning of a small garden created by an elderly Congolese woman living in a refugee camp in Rwanda? How does one represent the emotion that comes from seeing a metal caravan painted with scenes of Syria in a refugee camp in Jordan? How does one best account for informal communities based on ties back to the home country that do not conform to the official districts designated by camp officials?

Ideally, enabling refugees themselves living in camps to use methods like participatory mapping and access to geospatial tools, as demonstrated in the RefuGIS project, can begin to shed light on these issues. By extension, teaching geospatial technology to displaced, marginalized communities (in refugee camps or otherwise) can create opportunities for increasing diversity in fields like Geography—particularly when geospatial technology education is emphasized for improving students' technical skill and employment opportunities. Highlighting the experiences of displaced people around the world as an educational focus can bring broader cultural awareness and cross disciplinary boundaries to help solve global challenges.

<sup>10</sup>Mei-Po Kwan, "Affecting Geospatial Technologies: Toward a Feminist Politics of Emotion." *The Professional Geographer* 59 (1: 2007): 22–34.

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# On the Pedagogical Value of Not Going There: Mobility, Fossil Fuel Consumption, and the Production of Refugees

*Joseph Nevins*

There's little question that "forced migration" and (im)mobility related to people seeking refuge outside their countries of origin or official residence are matters of grave (and growing) concern. And there's no doubt that undergraduate courses need to address these matters. The question is, how?

One approach involves long-distance travel. Visiting contested and heavily policed borderlands, as well as refugee camps and detention centers, it is said, provides an enhanced learning experience, one that a mere classroom-based course does not and cannot. Moreover, some suggest that "going there" and "connecting with" the peoples and places that students are studying facilitates the otherwise unattainable making of ties and bodies of knowledge that contribute to endeavors that go beyond the scope of an academic course, laying the basis for collaborations and organizing efforts that lead to positive change-making.

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In what follows, I do not examine these assumptions. Instead, I consider the work that long-distance travel courses do to contribute to some of the very factors that underlie “forced” and illegalized human movement across international divides. I thus focus on the ties between climate change, fossil fuel consumption, and associated inequities. In doing so, I argue that the very exercise of mobility that such courses engage in is a form of world-making; it helps produce a world of people who need refuge outside their home areas.

If, as geographer Tim Cresswell (2006: 2) argues, movements of people are always “products and producers of power (and thus their attendant inequities),” we need to analyze the work that long-distance, resource-intensive mobility undertaken in the name of academic enrichment does—not least in terms of climate change, socioeconomic inequality, and vastly different capacities (in an effective sense) to traverse global space. Similarly, we need to consider the value of not going, of staying put physically, as a way to further the study of people on the move and their stymied mobility. In the end, I suggest that the exercise of *immobility* on the part of students and faculty concerned with forced migration can enrich the learning experience for all. It can also help to challenge the socio-ecological inequities that contribute to forced migration and the nation-state apparatuses of exclusion that limit the mobility of refugees and other people on the move.

### GOING THERE

Several years ago, I had a conversation with someone in the town where I live. The person told me about what he thought was a fantastic program his church was involved in. Local high school students traveled each year to a rural, low-income community in El Salvador for a couple of weeks. There, students learned about the everyday struggles of community members, the country’s civil war (1979–1990 roughly) and how it impacted area residents, and people’s ties to and perceptions of the United States. The students also did some physical labor, helping to repair and build houses. The experience, he assured me, was “life-changing” (in a positive sense) for all the students who made the trip.

In many ways, what my acquaintance shared resonated with me. On three occasions (in 2007, 2009, and 2012), I had helped to organize and lead study trips to the Arizona-Sonora borderlands as part of a Vassar College course on the U.S.-Mexico boundary, the border region, and matters of (im)migration, human rights, and nation-statism. It was a time



of rapid and extensive growth of the U.S. policing apparatus in the borderlands—growth that led to illegalized migrants taking ever-greater risks to circumvent the regime of exclusion, and to an associated dramatic spike in deaths (among other forms of suffering) of people who tried to enter the United States without authorization. It was also a time of intense political struggle in the borderlands, as evidenced by the emergence of militia groups focused on the U.S.-Mexico boundary and humanitarian aid groups that sought to assist migrants in need (see Nevins 2008, 2010). My co-instructors and I wanted to expose students to these developments in a “close” manner to deepen their understanding of the making of the border region and of how and to what effects the U.S.-Mexico boundary and its associated agents and institutions work to define, divide, and unite people and places. We also hoped that students would learn to appreciate the different ethical commitments—religious and secular—that inform struggles over the U.S.-Mexico boundary and related matters as a way of figuring out where they stood, and why, in relation to those struggles.

After all three course trips, many, if not most, of the students spoke powerfully upon returning to campus about how important the trip had been to broadening and deepening their understanding of course themes. They also reported that it markedly enhanced their appreciation of the intensity of the violence that characterized the U.S. migrant and border policing regime, and the importance of organizations and social movements on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico divide working to remedy the injustices embodied in the region and binational ties more broadly. Such feedback confirmed my sense of the value of firsthand encounters with people and places associated with what we read about in class.

Nonetheless, aspects of the trip to El Salvador, the one my acquaintance described—not least the financial expense and ecological costs of roundtrip air travel—disturbed me. When I gently raised some concerns, the person insisted that the people with whom they interacted in El Salvador wanted them to come. But I wondered if the response he reported was the answer to the wrong question. Rather than “should we come?” being the question, I said to myself, what if it were something like “We have X number of dollars and Y number of tons of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. What do you think would be the best way to use them given your needs and desires?” Had that been the question, I strongly doubt that the response would have been “we want your church group to visit with us.”

The reasons underlying my reaction were, in part, related to why I stopped participating in the travel course to the U.S.-Mexico borderlands.

In addition to the travel component of the course involving a great deal of work—before, during, and after the trip—it was expensive: more than \$2000 per student. Traveling back and forth from New York to Arizona and Sonora also entailed the consumption of a considerable amount of fossil fuel and, with it, the production of many tons of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions—together which constitute an exercise in ecological privilege and a furthering of ecological injustice (see Nevins 2014).<sup>1</sup> And then there was the question of what we were actually building—in terms of ties between students and faculty at Vassar College and the people with whom we interacted in the Arizona-Sonora borderlands—given the relative brevity of our time in the region (two weeks) and the difficulties of maintaining post-trip ties of substance, the distance between New York and the border region, and the transient nature of student life. Finally, there was the lingering question of why we needed to travel great distances and expend considerable resources to “see” and “know” the borderlands, when the realities of the U.S.-Mexico border regime were all around us (see Miller 2014)—in Poughkeepsie, where Vassar College is located, and in New York State. This is not to deny the uniqueness of what unfolds in the U.S.-Mexico borderlands proper. Instead, the goal is to raise the question of whether that uniqueness—the “extra” gained by conducting field research there rather than in proximity to campus—warrants so many costs, especially when many of those costs (e.g., intensifying climate change) are disproportionately borne by already vulnerable people and places.

In posing this question, I run the risk of positing clear divides between “here” and “there,” and “us” and “them.” In reality, our relations with peoples and places transcend the neat categories that suggest clear differences. As Doreen Massey (1993) reminds us, places are unbounded in that they shape and are, in turn, shaped by other places. So, too, are people bundles of connections. In other words, none of us is isolated in an absolute sense. We are, instead, always and unavoidably linked (to varying degrees) to others—past, present, and future. As Light Carruyo (2008: 109) writes in her rich, nuanced critique of international development endeavors in the Dominican Republic: “[B]eyond commodity chains and global communications, what weaves us together—ties of

<sup>1</sup>In 2007, we traveled between New York and Arizona by airplane. In 2009 and 2012, in order to reduce the CO<sub>2</sub> emissions associated with the trip, we traveled by train. Among the many “positives” of traveling in this manner was a substantially smaller CO<sub>2</sub> footprint. Still, the resulting emissions were considerable.

blood, compassion, fear, distrust, imagination, hope, history, memory, pain, violence, desire, responsibility, potential to create something better—cannot easily be disentangled.” Thus, for Carruyo, the question is not whether we engage (or not) with “distant” people and places. Rather, the challenge we must address involves rethinking (and transforming) how we do so—particularly in light of the profoundly unequal relations of power that typically characterize development. Thus, she writes, “ultimately what needs to change are the terms of the conversation” (Carruyo 2008: 80). How we might productively engage in a conversation on new terms—and why we need to do so, especially in a time of intensifying climate breakdown that demands a radical reduction in CO<sub>2</sub> emissions in short order (see Anderson et al. 2020)—is the concluding topic to which I now turn.

### BEYOND MOBILISM

The hypermobility enjoyed by some—not least academics and students at well-resourced institutions—is related to the highly constrained mobility of others (Cresswell 2006; Illich 1974; Massey 1993; Nevins 2018). To give one example, long-distance, high-speed mobility, especially air travel, commands a highly disproportionate share of the world’s fossil fuels. Particularly at a time when the amount of fossil fuel humans can consume is constrained by the realities of climate change (see Anderson et al. 2020), this limits what is available for other modes of fossil-fueled travel, and other activities. In this regard, not only is (im)mobility socially produced (Cresswell 2006), it is also socially (and geographically) productive—in addition to relational. And given the marked degree to which difference in mobility is tied to a broader set of inequities associated with unequal life and death circumstances, we might characterize this as “mobilism”—an “ism” of injustice (like racism and sexism) that is both product and producer of privilege and disadvantage (see Nevins et al. 2022).

For such reasons, Portia Roelofs (2019: 268), a scholar of international development, asserts that thinking critically about airborne travel “is not a question of ethical consumption or eco hand-wringing, but fits into a wider political-economy: air travel is the activity that most clearly embodies the links between inequality and ecological breakdown.” It is estimated, for instance, that more than 80 percent of the world’s population has never flown (see Gurdus 2017; Negrone 2016). In 2018, only eleven percent of people in the world traveled by air, with at most four percent

doing so internationally. And among those who do fly, there are pronounced disparities. In 2018, for example, *at most* one percent of the world's population accounted for more than half of the total emissions from passenger air travel (Gössling and Humpe 2020).

Academic air travel embodies this wider political economy of inequality and ecological breakdown. A study by Arsenault et al. (2019) focused on the Université de Montréal, for instance, estimates that academic air travel by itself is responsible for 30 percent of the university's CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. Among the professors who responded to the authors' survey, the size of their work-related travel footprints averaged 10.76 metric tons of CO<sub>2</sub> per year. (To provide a point of comparison, this exceeds the *total* per capita annual emissions of a typical person in Germany.) Another study found that the 28,000 attendees of the 2019 annual meeting of the American Geophysical Union in San Francisco emitted 80,000 tons of CO<sub>2</sub> through their travel to and from the gathering. This total, they write, is equal to the average weekly emissions of the Scottish city of Edinburgh and represents about three tons per scientist in attendance (Klöwer et al. 2020). As an additional point of comparison, average per capita yearly CO<sub>2</sub> emissions in Brazil in 2016 were 2.2 metric tons.<sup>2</sup>

What a more socially and ecologically just and sustainable academia might look like is an open question, but Roelofs (2019: 269) offers some ideas in writing to fellow Africanists: "Redistribute funds for air travel to those who have historically been shut out of academic networks, with the aim of eventually reducing emissions. Or maybe we should prioritise air travel for those in countries with poor internet connections?" Roelofs goes on to ask and suggest, "What if the money saved by Western-based scholars flying less was devoted to supporting virtual communication? As scholars of Africa, talking to our Africa-based colleagues should be a part of everyday life, not just something we only do when we get a free holiday out of it. CVs and promotion criteria should include a section for virtual collaborations" (see also Anderson et al. 2020). One could imagine such transformations similarly happening in relation to endeavors associated with the study of forced migration and refugees. The coronavirus pandemic has only heightened the need for far-reaching change: like climate breakdown, it manifests (at least in significant part) the consequences of rapacious consumption—particularly in the form of wildlife habitat

<sup>2</sup> See The World Bank, "CO2 emissions (metric tons per capita)," <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/EN.ATM.CO2E.PC>.

destruction, which helps to create ideal conditions for pandemics to arise (Shah 2020; Vidal 2020).

Among what can contribute to such transformation is an appreciation of how both forced migration and unequal international mobilities are often tied to depredations associated with empire in its various guises (see, e.g., Nevins 2017, 2019; Nevins et al. 2022). In this regard, “staying home,” particularly when it involves those who consume a disproportionate share of the earth’s resources and enjoy high levels of mobility, can be a form of anti-imperialist praxis (see Roshanravan 2012) in addition to climate justice. This also avoids the mistake of thinking that geographic travel—rather than epistemic “travel”—is the primary way one learns. In other words, one can “study abroad” while remaining at home (Roshanravan 2012). Academic courses undertake such epistemic travel all the time—through course readings and other material, for instance. But in embracing and celebrating courses that “go there” to gain what is seen as enhanced, more robust forms of (typically international) understanding—in this case, in relation to forced migration and refugee matters—academics make some dangerous missteps. First, in emitting considerable amounts of carbon dioxide to journey to and from the locale of investigation, travel courses help reproduce some of the very factors that underlie forced migration (see Miller 2017)—namely, intensifying climate change and associated forms of environmental degradation. Second, such courses give rise to the mistaken notion that one learns best by seeing and by physical presence. And third, travel courses normalize mobilism and associated forms of violence, effectively “teaching” students that the exercise of hypermobility and the consumption of a disproportionate share of the world’s resources are justifiable in the pursuit of knowledge.

Perhaps a more effective pedagogical approach to the investigation of forced migrations and refugees entails a deliberate decision to stay put, to not “go there” in a physical sense, and to include students in discussions about, and to allow them to debate that decision (Williams and Love 2022). This would help all those involved to grapple concretely with the ways in which high-consumption practices relate to the processes and actions that lead to displacement and constrained forms of mobility tied to “violent borders” (see Jones 2017) that prevent the displaced from reaching destinations of broad security. More broadly, it would illuminate the inherently and necessarily dynamic ties between agency and structure, between individual change and systemic transformation (see Jensen et al. 2022; Nicholas 2021). In addition, a deliberate decision “not to go there”

would compel those involved to identify other, less ecologically and socially costly and violent means to engage their interlocutors abroad—through the use of virtual technologies, for instance, or by “slow” modes of transport that stay on the earth’s surface (see Williams and Love 2022). Such a decision would also contribute to the radical changes in lifestyle among the globally affluent required by climate change (see Nicholas 2021; Wiedmann et al. 2020) and to the making of a world—one of sufficiency for all and socioeconomic equality (see Millward-Hopkins et al. 2020)—in which forced migration and refugees are far less common.

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PART IV

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## Belonging and Inclusion



# Teaching Tragedy: Toward a Pedagogy of Accountability—The Every Campus A Refuge Model

*Diya Abdo*

In 2015—at the height of the Syrian refugee crisis—I was struggling with how to leverage my position as a tenured professor of English at Guilford College to respond in any meaningful, material way to this global calamity.<sup>1</sup> A small Quaker liberal arts four-year institution in Greensboro, North Carolina, Guilford was the perfect place—in its ethos and history—to found an initiative like Every Campus A Refuge (ECAR), which advocates for housing refugees on campus grounds and supporting them in their resettlement.

<sup>1</sup>This paper is part of a larger project on other models the author is working on with Dr. Rima Abunasser.

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Like all liberal arts colleges, Guilford believes and aspires to the values of a community with a diverse membership who are treated, and treat each other, equally. As a Quaker institution, however, Guilford also emphasized integrity, justice, and stewardship. While “equality” and “diversity” were buzzwords I had heard frequently from higher education institutions, these were not. And as a second-generation Palestinian refugee born and raised in Jordan, and later an Arab and Muslim immigrant to the U.S., “justice” was personal and emotional for me—the dream of and for justice and a just world animated my refugee family’s lived experiences and our daily narratives. Coupled with the college’s Quaker heritage’s conceptualization of “stewardship”—a responsibility for and over our resources that required their use in ways that are good and right—“justice” found its vehicle. It was no longer an abstract concept waiting to be embodied in some one, some group, some act, some *thing*. Indeed, it had a ready form—the space and place of Guilford College itself.

And Guilford College had done so before. The Underground Railroad ran through the woods of the college; nearby Quakers provided sustenance to the escaping slaves, who were hiding in the trees’ expansive roots, and smuggled them up North.<sup>2</sup> Thus, it could be again a place of intentional refuge for those fleeing injustice. But to do so with integrity meant that we needed to do this work in ways that understood our accountability as a predominantly white institution operating within and animated by white structures, whether these be academic, the U.S. government’s policies and practices, or our country’s colonial and imperial histories and contexts. Guilford College did not admit black students until 1962<sup>3</sup> and is built in a region that belonged to indigenous tribes. So, while hosting refugees on Guilford’s campus could be easily seen as an extension of the institution’s core values and historical legacy, the effort must also be *rightly* seen as necessitated by another legacy we have inherited—that of empire-building, colonialism, and global politics that have displaced and dispossessed the indigenous peoples of this land and others around the globe.

Hence, as an institutional initiative, ECAR was designed to engage in these meaningful acts of solidarity while simultaneously subjecting them

<sup>2</sup>Lauren Barber, “An Underground Railroad station emerges near Guilford College,” *Triad City Beat*, February 14, 2019, <https://triad-city-beat.com/an-underground-railroad-station-emerges-near-guilford-college/>.

<sup>3</sup>“Race Relations at Guilford College,” UNC Greensboro Digital Collections, n.d., <http://libcdm1.uncg.edu/cdm/essayguilford/collection/CivilRights>.

to rigorous self-awareness and criticism. This quest for accountability—to steward resources to do just things not because we can but because we must—is one that necessarily centers the “Other.” This chapter will detail the ECAR hosting initiative and the attendant curricular and cocurricular components, showing how they—in their best practices, processes, and policies as well as in the curricular components’ readings, assignments, and projects—transcend poverty tourism and the spectacle of tragedy to focus on accountability toward hosted refugees, centering their agency, privacy, and dignity.

### THE ECAR MODEL

ECAR was inspired by a very basic idea: radical hospitality. Indeed, I stole it from Pope Francis who, shattered like the rest of us by the image of the four-year-old drowned Aylan Kurdi, called in the fall of 2015 on every parish in Europe to host a refugee family. A simple thought occurred to me then: isn’t a college or university just like a parish—a small city bound by shared values—with everything necessary to support newcomer families (housing, cafeterias, clinics, career services, human resources, etc.)? The idea was also inspired by my own Arab background and refugee heritage. The word for a university or college “campus” in Arabic is *haram* “حرم”; it means a physical space that is both “sacred” and “inviolable,” a sanctuary, a refuge. This, along with my Palestinian parents’ and grandparents’ experiences in Jordan—ones where difference was emphasized and felt, belonging was elusive, and “home” was never found—undergirds the ethos of Every Campus A Refuge. Here, the “ivory tower” exclusivity of college and university campuses can be fundamentally upended so that the newcomer’s belonging rather than difference was centralized, and the campus we speak of and imagine as safe is not only so for those who seemingly “belong” there, but for others in our community.

So that fall of 2015, I walked into Guilford’s president’s office and asked for a college house to host refugees. She agreed, and ECAR was born. We partnered with community organizations, including our local refugee resettlement agencies, to design a refugee hosting initiative built around the needs of the refugees. To center those needs, we steward every possible resource at our community’s disposal: free campus housing, utilities, Wi-Fi, and use of college facilities and resources (classes, gym, library, career center, cafeteria, etc.). We do so in ways that align with our hosted guests’ interests and individual desires. For example, Ali

Al-Khasrachi—the artist and calligrapher father of the Iraqi family our campus hosted for eight months in 2017—used a private studio and supplies provided by Guilford’s Art Department. His completed works were then exhibited on campus and picked up by a gallery in downtown Greensboro. Other hosted individuals’ requests and needs were similarly centralized in the services provided (musical instruments and support, sports and athletics, etc.). One of ECAR’s major goals is to ensure meaningful resettlement where refugees thrive rather than simply survive. This goal can be achieved only if the hosted individual’s needs, interests, passions, and personal goals—rather than our own—guide the process of hosting and support.

This support comes from a cadre of 125+ trained student, faculty, staff, and community member volunteers. Volunteers also provide airport welcome, prepare campus housing, raise and collect funds and in-kind donations, share meals, act as cultural brokers, provide interpretation, make important resettlement appointments (DSS, medical, etc.), and assist with childcare, job-hunting, shopping, transportation, filling out government forms, finding off-campus housing, and moving. When hosted guests transition off-campus, ECAR pays their security deposits, first month’s rent, and utilities setup. Support for each hosted family continues after they move off-campus, as volunteers continue to assist with goals set during the hosting period such as acquiring the GED or driver’s licenses. Willing and trained volunteers bring their skills, passions, disciplines, expertise, and resources to this asset-based community of practice that provides a softer landing and stronger beginning for refugees resettling in U.S. cities. Regardless of endowment size or available funding, all colleges and universities are resource-rich in these ways. Ultimately, this work involves existing brick and mortar, human and material resources already doing the same work for students, and students themselves, who would have been volunteering elsewhere.

Since January 2016 and as of this writing, we have hosted 86 refugees on Guilford’s campus—38 of them children—from Syria, Sudan, Iraq, Uganda, Rwanda, the DRC, Colombia, CAR, Afghanistan, and Venezuela. We are currently hosting a six-member family. Typically, families stay for an average of five months, at which point (employed and with SSN) they are able to resettle more successfully in their chosen communities in Greensboro. There are 13 other ECAR campuses, including Wake Forest University, Washington State University, and Old Dominion University;

they have collectively hosted more than 150 refugees.<sup>4</sup> At the Guilford College chapter, we use surveys and questionnaires to solicit feedback from both hosted guests and volunteers about their experiences, so that we may continually center those experiences as we reflect on and refine the initiative's best practices. These have been compiled in a Best Practices Manual that is regularly updated and shared with interested schools to ensure that they adopt the program in effective, ethical ways: empowering the community partner and their refugee clients—and safeguarding the guests' privacy, dignity, and agency even while engaging and educating the campus communities.

Hence, ever since its inception, ECAR was always *about* and *for* the “Other,” rather than about or for our students, allowing for a decolonizing approach to “service-learning.” While the volunteer students' learning happened, it wasn't the cause and it wasn't the reason. ECAR was not created to meet students' educational needs nor the institution's curricular and cocurricular goals. Our hosted guests' needs were prioritized, especially the primary need for safe, affordable housing, which is rare for current residents of the U.S., let alone newcomers who lack the credit background or Social Security numbers to secure it—and whose one-time stipend of \$1000 and three-month expectation for self-sufficiency promotes failure, not success.

In many ways, ECAR also flipped the traditional service-learning model where institutions often train students in “real-world” scenarios at the expense of overburdened community partners and organizations who, frequently understaffed and underfunded, must also navigate educating our volunteer students. The ECAR initiative inverts this model: students are no longer going *out there*; rather, we are bringing the community into *our space*, thus reframing for whom campus space can and should be used. And rather than a testing or training ground for our students, our community partners are co-educators and co-trainers. In the ECAR model, the institution's partnership with a refugee resettlement agency and frequent collaboration with other local organizations, service providers, and nonprofits stimulate important conversations centered on collective community-building and consciousness raising.

<sup>4</sup>During the Afghan evacuee/refugee crisis in the fall of 2021, many other campuses joined the initiative including, for the first time, public institutions.

## THE CURRICULAR COMPONENT

In 2017, I realized that I could strengthen ECAR's impact and longevity by institutionalizing and formalizing the initiative by embedding it in the curriculum. This was a way to guarantee its existence as well as ensure that the model was grounded in what the institution valued most—its academic and curricular offerings. As a Guilford College Center for Principled Problem Solving (CPPS) Fellow, I designed two minors that were offered out of the CPPS. These Principled Problem Solving Experience (PPSE) Minors—"Every Campus A Refuge (ECAR)" (Fall '17 to Spring '19) and "Forced Migration and Resettlement Studies" (Fall '19 to Spring '21)—required 16 credits over two years and allowed students to study, in intentional ways, global and local issues of forced migration and refugee resettlement while earning credit for the work of hosting refugees on campus and supporting them in resettlement. For these minors, I created a variety of new courses that focused on refugeeism and forced displacement (PPS 150 and PPS 250); on local efforts in refugee and (im)migrant support (PPS 151 and PPS 251); and on refugee and immigrant literature (ENGL 350). The minor facilitates students' learning about what forced displacement is and why it happens; centralizes the voice, agency, and perspectives of the individuals who experience it; emphasizes how we can collectively organize and advocate to address the problems of forced displacement and resettlement; and does the work of principled problem-solving in refugee resettlement through the following course offerings:

- I. PPS 150 or 151: Forced Migration and Resettlement Studies I
- II. PPS 250 or 251: Forced Migration and Resettlement Studies II
- III. One course focused on understanding the causes for forced displacement and (im)migration (many choices from offerings across the college).
- IV. One course focused on the voice, agency, and perspectives of (im)migrants and displaced individuals (many choices from offerings across the college).
- V. One course focused on building community, advocacy, organizing (many choices from offerings across the college).

This variety of required and elective courses involved a collaborative team of several faculty members from various departments and disciplines. Instructors designed a required course assignment that engaged students

in making and reflecting on connections between their learning in the course and their work with ECAR. Students experienced refugee voices and narratives by engaging in conversational interactions with refugees through NaTakallam, a nonprofit that employs forcibly displaced individuals by connecting them with students for conversations over Skype. This component centralizes refugee voices and experiences without exploiting the particular refugees we host on our campus or mining them as resources for our benefit, and with whom “educational conversations” are not expected nor enforced. If these conversations do happen, they should be initiated by the hosted guest; the volunteer must uphold utmost privacy and confidentiality about such conversations. Student volunteers are also vetted/background checked and sign confidentiality agreements regarding interactions with their clients. We also center hosted guests’ needs by asking students to design and implement an advocacy, problem-solving, or other type of resettlement and (im)migrant support project derived from their learning experiences in the program and on which future students can build—centering the stated need of the community (hosted guests and partners). This project should align with each student’s inter/disciplinary training, their skills and passions, and their vocational and personal goals.

The recent increase in student activism on American college and university campuses under the leadership of students of color, especially women, LGBT, and gender nonconforming community members, has revealed the racist and colonialist framework of even the most liberal educational models, including those built around student-centered teaching and learning and which take as their core ethos the urgency to represent and uplift the underrepresented experiences of marginalized voices. Making trauma-informed narratives more visible at predominantly white institutions means navigating such important tasks “under western eyes”<sup>5</sup> which—unless approached with an eye to accountability—could potentially contribute to a culture of fetishization; instead of simply teaching “under western eyes,” we might also be unwittingly teaching “*for* western eyes.” Hence, a pedagogy of the oppressed is no longer enough. There is a pressing need for a pedagogy of accountability, one that acknowledges the location of the learning space and the identities of those who inhabit it. The ECAR PPSE Minors were designed carefully to work against fetishization by highlighting structural racism and institutional

<sup>5</sup>To borrow Chandra Talpade Mohanty’s use of the phrase.



accountability, decentering the student learning experience, and recentering the needs and lived experiences of the hosted guests. However, such a pedagogy—one of accountability—should extend beyond the curricular, indeed even beyond the cocurricular, to institutional practices, policies, and positionalities.

As institutions of higher learning, we do not simply strive to teach our students. We engage in pedagogies that model for the larger communities we are part of (physically and socially—our towns, cities, states, and countries, our alumni, peer and aspirant institutions, prospective students, etc.)—what community *ought to be*. And we also acknowledge that we are part of systems that *ought not to be* and *ought never to have been*. After we acknowledge, we must then *do* something about those systems. We can create communities that aspire to what ought to be. We can create communities that hold themselves accountable for the pasts that should never have been and the presents that still are. Hosting refugees on campus grounds and supporting them in their resettlement is just such a pedagogy that converts accountability to justice, exclusivity to inclusivity, and exclusion to integration.

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# The Power of Participatory and Immersive Filmmaking

*Peter Decherney*

FilmAid Kenya runs film schools in refugee camps, and each year the organization trains dozens of young filmmakers in the Kakuma and Dadaab camps. Some FilmAid Kenya graduates go on to work as wedding photographers and freelance video journalists—jobs that have surprising demand in the camps. FilmAid Kenya’s most lasting contribution, however, is empowering young people to tell their personal stories. Many of the beautiful, often surprising, films made by FilmAid Kenya’s students have gone on to win film festival awards and, contribute to the global conversation about refugees. When the films do not find audiences outside the camps, there is a cathartic power in the act of communicating. FilmAid Kenya has also built a creative community within the refugee camps; students and graduates spend time at the FilmAid Kenya compound on their days off, even when the power supply is routinely suspended, disabling the cameras and editing stations.

I first met FilmAid Kenya’s leadership team in September 2015. During Barack Obama’s last address to the United Nations General Assembly as

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president of the United States, he spoke about global refugees. “[I]n the face of suffering families,” he explained, “our nation of immigrants sees ourselves.” He called on countries to work together to address the plight of refugees, because “We live in an integrated world—one in which we all have a stake in each other’s success.”<sup>1</sup>

While President Obama spoke uptown, the State Department organized a concurrent meeting downtown at the New School for Social Research. A small panel discussion and breakout session convened NGOs, media companies, and social media platforms to address representations of refugees. Future First Lady Dr. Jill Biden spoke about a woman she had met on her recent trip to the Dadaab Refugee Camp in Kenya. The actor Ben Stiller, who would later become a UNHCR Goodwill Ambassador, talked about meeting with Syrian refugees his foundation supported. And a Syrian refugee, Faiza Gareb, spoke about her journey to the U.S. Together, they called on the media makers and distributors in the room to tell stories about individual immigrant experiences in order to combat thinking about migration demographically and to counter the omnipresent political rhetoric—and propaganda—about refugees.

Several organizations shared projects that were already underway. The advertising company Ogilvy, for example, showed off its mockup of a refugee flag based on the fluorescent-striped orange design of life preservers. Between planned presentations, participants informally learned about each other’s work and shared ideas; some started to collaborate.

I was invited to the New School meeting because the previous year I had been a State Department Arts Envoy to Myanmar, a project that resulted in me making a short film about Myanmar’s straight-to-DVD film industry. At the event, I became excited by the work of FilmAid Kenya. Founded in 1999 by film producer Caroline Baron, FilmAid International started by showing educational and entertainment films in Macedonian refugee camps, and gradually developed into a global refugee film school.

After the conference, FilmAid International’s Executive Director, Keefe Murren, and I wondered what would happen if we brought together FilmAid Kenya students and my University of Pennsylvania students. With an inaugural grant from Penn’s Making a Difference in Diverse Communities program, I took a group of Penn students to Kakuma in the summer of 2017.

<sup>1</sup> Barack Obama, “Remarks by President Obama to the United Nations General Assembly (Sept 28, 2015), <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/09/28/remarks-president-obama-united-nations-general-assembly>.

## COLLABORATIVE FILMMAKING

At the Kakuma Refugee Camp in Kenya, FilmAid Kenya and Penn students worked together to make a series of short informational films commissioned by the United Nations. The films explained the U.N. services available at a new refugee settlement, Kalobeyei, adjacent to the Kakuma Camp. The films would be used by the U.N. as part of an orientation for new arrivals.

The Kalobeyei Settlement takes a novel approach to refugee resettlement. Following the principles of the U.N.'s 2016 New York Declaration,<sup>2</sup> the Kalobeyei Settlement is designed to return agency to refugees by giving them more choice over their living situations and allowing them to create a marketplace. The post-World War II vision of refugee camps as temporary safe spaces has slowly disappeared as they have become lifelong domiciles for migrants who may never return to their home countries.

Kakuma, like most refugee camps, was designed as a temporary waystation for refugees, but it has developed into a large, permanent city. The Kakuma camp has existed for over a quarter-century and has close to 200,000 residents. Unable to return to South Sudan, Somalia, and other countries, camp residents are in a perpetual state of waiting. Not only can't they return home; they are legally prevented from earning a living or entering the Kenyan workforce. At this point, a whole generation of African children have grown up only knowing the camp. The Kenyan government has continually attempted to shutter both Kakuma and Dadaab, with no real plan for their current inhabitants.

The Kalobeyei Settlement was designed from the beginning as a perpetual community rather than a temporary camp. New arrivals are given credit to purchase a house that meets their needs. When we were there, the Kalobeyei homes were still built out of corrugated metal like those in the refugee camps, but the foundation of brick dwellings was starting to appear. Kalobeyei inhabitants get credit to use in the market, purchasing the items they need rather than receiving predetermined rations of food and supplies. The allotments are small, but they allow for choice and agency. Each house comes with a small kitchen garden, which tenants can use for subsistence farming and to grow crops they can sell in the market.

<sup>2</sup>“The New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants” (September 19, 2016), <https://refugeesmigrants.un.org/declaration>.

Green gardens with short stalks were just starting to sprout when we were there in 2017. Perhaps most tellingly, the local Turkana Kenyans were choosing to live in the Kalobeyei Settlement in order to access the U.N.'s services and nascent economy.

The FilmAid Kenya-Penn student films explained the workings of the Kalobeyei housing, water, education, health, and other systems as well as the expanding marketplace. Teams made up of 3-4 Penn students and 3-4 FilmAid graduates researched the systems they were assigned, with the FilmAid students of course taking the lead. The teams then shared the responsibility for conducting interviews, filming B-roll, and editing their films.

The "water team," for example, followed the route of water delivery from trucks to water towers to pipelines to buckets to homes. The team quickly realized the hopefulness of sprouting kitchen gardens; it takes a lot of optimism to pour a scarce resource into the ground. The "health team" explained how to navigate the small Kalobeyei hospitals. One film focused on a service classified by the U.N. as "Protection." The Protection services include offices for reporting gender-based and sexual violence as well as support for refugees recovering from violence. One surprise for this team was that a traveling Protection unit gave massages to residents of Kalobeyei, practicing a holistic approach to rebuilding lives after displacement.

Another team's film explained the fast-growing school system in Kalobeyei. One school had grown to three, and in each school, the FilmAid Kenya and Penn filmmakers saw parents who had not previously had access to education, sitting in elementary school classes next to their children. Like most of the other teams, the education film crew decided to tell the story of one individual student within their film on the larger system. The education team woke up before dawn one morning with Thothamoi, who was at the time the only girl in her middle school. The team walked the 45 minutes to school with Thothamoi, and they spent the day shooting cinema vérité-style footage of her experience. Answering the New School panel participants' appeal, the film teams focused on stories of individuals (Figs. 1, 2, 3, and 4).

There were certainly complications to team dynamics. There were language barriers; one team communicated mostly in French, a second language for most of its members. Also, there were differing gender expectations that the teams had to navigate. But there were also many reasons that the FilmAid Kenya and Penn program successfully built relationships across teams. The project wasn't an instance of one group teaching another. Both the FilmAid Kenya and Penn students were talented filmmakers who shared their expertise with each other. And this wasn't a charitable mission,



**Fig. 1** Members of the UPenn and Kakuma team documenting the healthcare system capture B-roll



**Fig. 2** Part of the UPenn and Kakuma team documenting the water system takes a selfie





**Fig. 3** Members of the UPenn and Kakuma team conduct an interview with a resident



**Fig. 4** Members of the UPenn and Kakuma document the food distribution system



although we did leave behind some cameras and computers. The groups were all working together to reach a common goal, and, importantly, it was not an abstract goal. They were creating films that would be (and have in fact been) valuable to new arrivals at the Kalobeyei Settlement. The films have been viewed by thousands of new arrivals to Kalobeyei.

More than just pursuing a shared mission, the teams gained a shared respect for each other. FilmAid students are incredibly driven, and being accepted into the program isn't an easy journey. Before enrolling at FilmAid Kenya, the refugees had to resist the many pressures that caused their peers to leave primary and secondary school. They resisted the strong pull to take jobs that could help support their families, and many of the girls fought family pressure to enter into early marriages. FilmAid Kenya students pursued their passion to learn filmmaking rather than do something with a more immediate payoff, clearly an almost universal experience for artists. The hardworking Penn and FilmAid Kenya students recognized themselves in each other.

### VIRTUAL REALITY

While the students worked long days, many of them woke up extra early to assist me with another film project: a short virtual reality film about life in Kalobeyei. I had only started working in 360 video and virtual reality (VR) when I attended the State Department's New School meeting. I was excited by new high-end advances in VR being made by Oculus and HTC, but I was equally excited by the growing market for consumer VR cameras and the YouTube VR app that gave anyone with a mobile phone the ability to have a 360-video viewing experience.

The call to tell stories about refugees immediately sparked ideas about using VR to be able to put viewers in an unfamiliar space and create a connection to the refugees. I wasn't the only VR filmmaker to have this idea. A number of VR films from this period attempted to recreate the experience of refugees, most famously Gabo Arora and Chris Milk's U.N.-sponsored *Clouds Over Sidra* (2015).

VR is often mistakenly discussed as a medium that recreates reality whole. You place a camera in a space and suddenly you've captured it. But, of course, VR cameras and software mediate experiences rather than simply capturing them. There are several aspects of VR's mediation that makes it ideal for connecting with novel experiences and filtering those experiences through the eyes of others.

Some of the great affordances of VR are embodiment (or presence), connection between viewer and subject, and active learning. When you put on a VR headset, you occupy the image, taking up space in a way that you do not in other media. If the camera is placed too low, for example, a viewer might feel like she is inhabiting a child's body. If the camera is too high, conversely, the viewer has the feeling of floating. In addition to the sense of presence, VR connects viewers with three-dimensional representations of others that creates empathetic attachments unlike anything achieved in flat video. Finally, a VR viewer has the freedom to look and sometimes move around. They can actively engage with a scene unfolding around them and create a variety of routes through it. This freedom, I would argue, encourages a deeper learning experience.

VR has been around in different forms for decades, but the styles and codes of using it to tell stories are still emerging. Part of the excitement for the FilmAid Kenya and Penn students in creating a VR film was trying out new storytelling techniques.

The short 7.5-minute VR film that we created, as I have seen over and over again, helps bring Kalobeyei to life for viewers in a way that still photos, text, and even video cannot. The film is simply a series of long takes that reveal families working their kitchen garden or a father and daughter preparing for the market to open. I think the most impactful sequences take place in the Kalobeyei primary school. When I have shown still photographs of these classrooms, they tend to reinforce peoples' preconceptions: the classrooms are overcrowded, under-resourced, and sad. Learning can't happen there. But when the same viewers put on a VR headset, the Kalobeyei classes come alive for all of the aforementioned reasons. Viewers feel present in the classroom, the students and teacher have volume, and viewers are free to look around. Viewers can choose to look at the teacher in front of the classroom, putting themselves in the position of a student. Or they can look at the student sitting next to them, having the experience filtered through the student's facial expression and gestures. You can feel the energy, optimism, and learning in the room.

The most powerful sequence at the school is clearly the one set in the kitchen. The Kalobeyei school kitchen is a small structure with corrugated metal walls and a dirt floor in which a few women cook lunch for 3500 children in two gigantic vats. Hearing about the cook's miraculous task in the voice-over is awe-inspiring, but the power comes from the intimacy of being alone in the dark room with one of the cooks. More than the other scenes, it achieved the melding of medium and mission, connecting viewers to a refugee's everyday experience.

## AFTER KALOBEYEI

If this project had ended with this one summer class, I don't think it would have been a success. But the engagement with FilmAid Kenya, participatory filmmaking, and virtual reality has continued.

Back at Penn, the students who went to Kalobeyei started the Penn FilmAid Club devoted to social action filmmaking. The club won a prize for civic engagement from the university's president and provost in its first year, and the students have continued to make films with and about the FilmAid students and about refugees. Among other projects, Sonari Chidi's film, *Shattering Refuge*, shot in part at Kakuma, has gone on to win many film festival awards.

I regularly teach a Virtual Reality Lab class that continues the work started with the Kalobeyei VR film. In 2018, the VR Lab class collaborated with refugee resettlement agencies and programs in Philadelphia. One group from this class partnered with the organization Southeast Asian Mutual Assistance Association Coalition (SEAMAAC) to make a VR film about the organization's food truck. Many refugees want to start businesses that use their cooking skills, but starting a new business, especially a restaurant, is difficult. SEAMAAC's ingenious solution was to purchase a food truck they lend to refugees to cater events or set up at a park. The students' VR film is a view from inside the food truck, offering a glimpse into the frenetic pace and precision of cooking inside the truck.

Although it is a film about SEAMAAC's food truck project, it is told through the experience of two married refugee couples who have used the truck to start catering businesses. One of the couples, who are from Myanmar, successfully launched a business that grew into the largest sushi supplier to Philadelphia grocery stores. When we held an event to discuss and show the student films, one member of the couple, ZarZo, was not only the most eloquent speaker on the panel—she also catered the event from the food truck.

I have since taken students to Puerto Rico, where we used VR to capture the work of artists confronting climate change refugees and other issues after Hurricane Maria. And I have worked with students to make the documentary *Dreaming of Jerusalem* about Ethiopian Jewish refugees waiting to emigrate to Israel. In 2022, I returned to Kakuma with another group of students. We partnered with FilmAid Kenya and its students to create an online course based on FilmAid's film training program.

These projects have been most successful when they fulfill the mission set out at the New School: when they individualize the refugee experience

at the level of production, storytelling, and viewer experience. While refugees lack basic necessities, and filmmaking may seem to some like a luxury, working with refugees to tell their stories and other stories about the refugee experience is a fundamental step in changing the global narrative, affecting political change, and sparking greater understanding.

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# Finding Place: Strengthening Pedagogical Practices on Forced Migration Through Interpersonal Understanding in Higher Education

*Aena Khan, Faith Northern, Sofia Rao, Adam Weil,  
and Maria Hantzopoulos*

On November 14, 2019, six students at Vassar College began an Intensive course with their advisor, Professor of Education Maria Hantzopoulos.<sup>1</sup> At the beginning of a semester-long class titled “Finding Place: Refugee Youth Schooling Experiences,” the four authors and two additional peers, none of whom had collectively met before, were eager to examine the intersection of forced migration and informal educational spaces in Athens,

<sup>1</sup>Due to schedule conflicts, two students, Jana Clevenger and Sophie Kennen, were unable to aid us in writing this chapter. We would like to thank them for their hard work and contributions to the work and course.

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Greece. As Intensives were a new pedagogical initiative at Vassar to get students out of the classroom and diving deep into a focused topic, we, the authors of this chapter, felt anticipation over the openness of the experience and our ability to shape the direction of the course.

Ultimately, “Finding Place” aimed to (1) study the sociopolitical and historical contexts surrounding forced migration to Greece, (2) assist our professor with fieldwork on a project she is conducting on refugee education in Greece, and (3) work in partnership with a Greek refugee-led grassroots organization providing cultural and educational programming for refugees. While the planned class initially entailed a trip to Athens to research and learn on the ground, the onset of Covid-19 made this impossible, and the course required significant changes. Nevertheless, this chapter illustrates the important lessons we learned, in hopes of contributing to a growing discourse on how to incorporate more inclusive, community-engaged ways of teaching about forced migration into higher education classrooms.

In light of recent and unprecedented global migration, many institutions of higher learning are increasingly studying the effects of forced migration on various sectors of society, such as health, politics, economy, and education. For some, the impetus for this interest is not only to understand the impact of forced migration more broadly, but also to understand how people who have been forcibly displaced bring knowledge, ideas, and skills to their new local contexts. Too often, academia and mainstream media marginalize the lived experiences of affected communities. At the same time, there is a growing push to highlight refugee voices. Thus, with “Finding Place,” Professor Hantzopoulos created a course that incorporated these voices into an academic setting with students from different disciplinary backgrounds. Specializing in Peace Education, Professor Hantzopoulos’s work combines theoretical foundations, restorative justice, and multidisciplinary techniques to create practical changes through curriculum development and design, collaboration, service, and action. She had been deeply engaged with students in the large migrant community in the greater Poughkeepsie, NY, area. The hands-on, community-engaged learning experience carried that expertise beyond the Hudson Valley, providing a first-hand lens for us students to understand the complexities of forced migration in educational contexts.

This chapter discusses the context of our field work in tandem with the course’s aims and structure. It also details how the course integrated restorative justice pedagogy, using one of our workshops as an example.

Due to our inability to travel because of the pandemic, this chapter will detail the pivots and pitfalls we experienced. Through it all, we concur that multidisciplinary approaches paired with student-led projects are key to developing a critical understanding of forced migration and possible inventive partnerships. Thus, we conclude with several recommendations for future initiatives based on our experiences with developing instructional material. In the end, we gained a deeper understanding of the importance of contextualized, developmental initiatives within undergraduate classrooms.

### CONTEXT, COURSE OVERVIEW, AND WORKSHOP DESIGN

Over the last 30 years, Greece has become a site for an increasing number of refugees to seek asylum. The collapse of the USSR in 1991, the subsequent expansion of the E.U., and the Schengen Agreement of 1985 that led to the abolition of Europe's national borders radically transformed European immigration patterns (Kasimis and Kassimi 2004). As the newly independent states in Eastern Europe and Central Asia sought to overcome difficulties related to state-building under capitalist auspices, Greece experienced the highest increase of immigrants at the time, due to its location and extended coastlines (Kasimis and Kassimi 2004). Compounded by wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, and conflict in Africa (notably Eritrea and Somalia), Greece continued to experience an influx of displaced populations. Although many refugees sought to migrate beyond Greece, new border control measures passed in 2016 suppressed movement into Northern Europe, consequently leaving Greece with the responsibility of integrating the more than 50,000 refugees present (International Rescue Committee n.d.). While approximately 16,000 refugees remain confined to the Greek islands of Lesbos, Chios, Kos, Samos, and Leros as of 2021, the majority (38,000 refugees) live on the Greek mainland in urban environments (International Rescue Committee n.d.). There, refugees face unique challenges navigating social and economic integration in Greece, particularly in urban areas.

While most refugees entering Greece come through the islands, an increasing number of refugees are settling in Athens. Education plays a crucial part in this decision to settle there, specifically as students seek language instruction in Greek and English to begin integrating into Greek society. As a result, there has been a rise in the creation of urban refugee centers to provide support and resources to these communities. Professor

Hantzopoulos had been working in partnership with one of the refugee-run organizations, Zaytun,<sup>2</sup> for several years. Located in Exarchia, a neighborhood in Athens renowned as a haven for asylum-seekers from overcrowded camps, the organization was established to offer humanitarian relief to those experiencing protracted displacement in and from the Middle East and beyond. Their commitments include child protection, education, food security, and shelter, and to increase the quality of life and maintain sustainable conditions for refugees. Zaytun's branch in Athens offers a variety of courses, including empowerment projects for refugee women and children, a reading and storytelling group, and English Language Learner (ELL) classes.

The initial goal of the course was to have Vassar students travel with Professor Hantzopoulos to Athens in March 2020 to collect data at Zaytun for her research project exploring how programs for refugee and migrant children foster and/or hinder a sense of well-being and belonging for refugee youth who are experiencing trauma from war, displacement, and dispossession. Participation in this study and international research experience required an application and interview. The six students included four students majoring in Educational Studies and two majoring in International Studies. While some of the group had experience with curriculum building, other students had worked with refugee populations in the Poughkeepsie area, NY. After being selected in fall 2019, students were expected to meet and prepare by reading broadly about topics like migrations and schooling, contemporary Greek politics and economics, and EU refugee policies. This part of the class was not interrupted by the pandemic, and the class met biweekly between November 2019 and December 2019 to discuss the possibilities and parameters of the project. During this time, we were introduced to Zaytun's work. From January 2020 to March 2020, we met weekly and prepared for ground-level work in Athens by studying a variety of economic, political, theoretical, and pedagogical texts, as well as reading on historical and socioeconomic contexts in Greece, refugee education, and workshop development. We then learned about global migration to Greece, refugee education and education in emergencies at large, and, more specifically, refugee educational initiatives in Greece, to situate the work of Zaytun.

<sup>2</sup>The name of the organization has been changed out of privacy concerns for organizers, students, and members of the larger community.



Professor Hantzopoulos stressed that research should be reciprocal and collaborative, and, as a result, she thought it was important that we find out from our Greek partners what they might need from us while we were there conducting interviews and observing. Since Professor Hantzopoulos already had an established relationship with them, she facilitated some calls early on to discuss what was needed from her students before their planned arrival in March 2020. Over the March 2020 spring break, students were scheduled to travel to Athens for two weeks to help conduct interviews and surveys at the site, as well as volunteer at the site based on the host's needs. Finally, upon return, students were expected to work together to analyze data and complete a final project. Out of a desire to maintain an intimate, cooperative group setting, as well as because of budgetary constraints since this was funded through a grant, Professor Hantzopoulos intentionally limited the group's size. Students came from a variety of concentrations: Education, History, Political Science, International Studies, Forced Migration Studies, and Urban Studies.

Zaytun initially asked us to examine and update their comprehensive English language curriculum, which served people mainly from Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. Their students belonged to different age groups and had different levels of English language fluency, from beginner to advanced learners. Zaytun also asked us to make their curriculum more socially and culturally relevant. Further communications with Zaytun brought up an interest in professional development of the volunteer educators, some of whom are refugees themselves. As a result, the second phase of our work focused on creating and conducting teacher-centered workshops. Our partnership with the organization remained the foundation of the course's bottom-up structure, granting us the ability to create learning materials and projects that centered the needs of English language learners at Zaytun. These considerations compounded into a cooperative effort between us, Professor Hantzopoulos, and instructors at Zaytun as we explored various modes of learning, from traditional ELL curricula to digitally engaged learning activities.

Our first major task was revising their existing curricula, which were targeted at speakers of varying English proficiencies, from beginners to advanced students. We augmented the work by creating projects that focused on vocabulary for daily life, restorative justice activities that facilitated connections between students, and journaling exercises to promote building one's own voice in a new language. We divided the curriculum by level and then worked in pairs to tackle each part. This allowed us to use

our personal strengths in curriculum development, elementary education, drama, and arts to revamp the English curriculum. For instance, rather than simply have students memorize decontextualized vocabulary about places, we created an activity that engaged students in scenarios about navigating public transportation. In another instance, we suggested interactive lessons like a staged food market where the lesson allows students to navigate their new environment. We relied on communication and guidance from Zaytun—without their position as a grassroots organization with intimate knowledge of their community, it would have been difficult to update their comprehensive English language curriculum in a culturally and socially relevant fashion.

Alongside this revisionary curriculum development work, we came up with a preliminary menu of workshops for Zaytun's volunteer educators to determine what would be most useful for the organization. The menu of workshops, a product of our individual expertise and passions, went through a polling process. There, at the collective suggestion of Zaytun's instructors, we created three workshops: *Narrative and Creative Writing with Kids Learning a New Language*; *Improving Classroom Functions: Tools for Class Participation and Discussion*; and *Using Technology in the Classroom*. The six of us split into three groups of two to develop each workshop separately. Each week, we communicated with teachers at Zaytun through Professor Hantzopoulos to ensure that the activities and curricular changes we proposed were relevant to students' needs and followed trauma-informed teaching strategies. As a precursor to our work in Greece, we planned to meet directly with the organizers upon arrival in March to review the materials, and then determine how to implement the workshop on the day it was scheduled.

However, one day before departure, we received the heartbreaking news that we had to cancel our long-planned trip because of the Covid-19 pandemic. As a result, the organizers asked us to send the materials so they could implement the Creative Writing workshop with local volunteers, even though they were not fully designed for others to simply implement. However, given the educational deficit and need, Zaytun thought they could potentially implement this workshop on their own. The *Improving Classroom Functions* and *Using Technology in the Classroom* workshops were then postponed for June 2020, under the assumption that by then the pandemic would end and we would be able to travel. In the following section, we discuss more broadly the theoretical and pedagogical underpinnings and development of the three workshops, and then focus on the

*Narrative and Creative Writing* course to discuss both the possibilities and limitations we faced in enacting this workshop with the local host site.

## INTEGRATING RESTORATIVE JUSTICE PEDAGOGY: THEORY, PRACTICE, AND REFLECTION

In designing the workshops, each of us brought unique knowledge from a variety of subjects, yet we shared a common desire to create workshops that would support teachers in teaching refugee students English through restorative justice practices. Restorative justice practices have often been understood in education as a way to understand disciplinary structures, yet Greg Ogilvie and David Fuller illustrate how restorative justice can also act as a pedagogy and framework for teachers. This can “provide a more appropriate, relevant, and compassionate curriculum” (Ogilvie and Fuller 2016). By framing students and teachers as peers with equally valuable, albeit differing, experiences, restorative justice pedagogy is especially effective in breaking down power dynamics between students from vulnerable populations and volunteer teachers, who often have privileged identities. We hoped that through the lens of restorative justice pedagogy, the workshops could provide tools for teachers to create caring environments in which refugee learners were able to fully share their ideas and humanity.

Linda Christensen’s (2009) book *Teaching for Joy and Justice: Re-imagining the Language Arts Classroom* provided a key framework for examining how social justice and providing spaces for marginalized groups may be achieved through language arts. Though her work examined social justice education in American high schools, members of our Vassar group attempted to adapt Christensen’s framework to use in creating workshops that provided the space for refugee students to examine social and political institutions and the surrounding structural violence. Determined to be culturally aware and trauma-informed, our workshop aimed to introduce a pedagogical approach that highlights refugees’ experiences without reintroducing trauma.

The restorative justice pedagogical framework was woven throughout our workshops, but was manifested mostly through our students’ creative writing workshop. When the creative writing workshop was selected by the staff at Zaytun in January, two of us, Adam and Sophie, were best positioned to take on its design. At Vassar, Adam had created a Spoken

Word workshop at a local high school for a Peace Education Class, and Sophie had a background in arts education. Together, Adam and Sophie created a 30-slide presentation for Zaytun and other community teachers as part of a two-hour workshop. Adam and Sophie wanted to create an environment that allowed participants (in this case, instructors) to experience the activities as well as learn about other activities that could be brought into refugee classrooms. One activity was called “Writing for Justice,” which asked students to write a narrative scene about an injustice they might have experienced while incorporating terms like ally and bystander. The activity would be accompanied by a conversation about how people are complex beings who constantly shift into different roles, depending on their environment and surroundings.

Overall, Adam and Sophie hoped to give community teachers the tools to provide spaces where refugees could practice their writing while also exploring their identity. Throughout the process of creating the workshop, the greatest concern was not pushing the refugee learners into situations that might force them to relive their trauma. For example, when discussing whether to include an “I am From Poem” activity that centers students’ histories and identities and sense of place, Adam commented: “I am wondering in this context if this actually might be too triggering, given that folks have been displaced from their homes. Maybe we could flip these to ‘Who I am’ poems?” Ultimately, the activity was replaced by “I am” poems where students would describe who they are in varying detail.

While we planned to review the materials with our hosts, getting to know teachers and students in person, revising the material as needed, based on input after we arrived in March, we were unable to do so when the trip was canceled due to the pandemic. Instead, as previously mentioned, the education director asked us to send her the materials so she could determine whether she could train volunteer teachers on her own. Since the intent of these workshops was to work with the ingenuity and experience of individual teachers, we thought it would be best to send material over first to see if they could be useful to the organization. However, we had initially anticipated that, at the very least, we would have time to connect in person and meet to discuss. While disappointed that we would not be able to deliver what we planned ourselves, we were grateful for the flexibility and generosity of our partners.

After sending the materials, the education coordinator reached out to discuss areas that needed improvement, including academic levels, and situating the work in the context of the majority of the refugees. For

example, Sophie and Adam received an email regarding a short excerpt by Yasmin Hai, titled “Revenge of Young Muslims,” from *Stories of Identity: Religion, Migration, and Belonging in a Changing World* that was in the lesson plan:

I’m afraid this text is not very suitable for our demographic, most of our beneficiaries do not have anywhere near the reading skills to understand the text and the subject itself is extremely delicate, for most of our beneficiaries religion is a very sensitive issue that we try not to pick apart too deeply in classes. I also feel some of the content in the rest of the PowerPoint needs adjusting—I wonder if at some point this week we could discuss at least this creative writing workshop in greater detail?

When that email hit our inbox, our stomachs sank. We had missed the mark. Despite our major goals with creating a critical, caring, culturally responsive workshop, we found that we still engaged with Zaytun through a “Westernized lens.” In our attempts to engage the local refugee population, we did not actually include appropriate materials. This was partly because we had not had the opportunity to meet them yet, which compounded our lack of community knowledge. While the story we chose for the workshop was meant to reflect the identities of the young people, the story was not only too triggering for children that migrated to Greece under harsh and traumatic circumstances, but also dealt with a subject (religion) that they might want to avoid discussing in that space. In addition, the language used was too advanced for the level of English language learners at Zaytun. We had chosen this excerpt because the subject matter loosely reflected the population Zaytun worked with, but it was not a successful choice.

The email illustrated how little we understood the refugee populations we hoped to work with, as well as our lack of knowledge on how to actually approach creating accessible, caring curriculum. Professor Hantzopoulos reassured us that if we were at Zaytun we would have been able to observe the organization before presenting, and then been able to modify our workshops to better fit the students’ needs and experiences. Nonetheless, we Vassar students fundamentally misunderstood the level of language proficiency of Zaytun’s students. While Adam and Sophie had created the workshop using Christensen’s models of social justice education in a distinctly U.S. racial context, the workshop needed to better translate such frameworks across cultures. Thus, we found that certain

U.S.-oriented materials on social justice education and refugee youth schooling experiences proved limited in this predominantly non-Western setting. Moreover, on the subsequent Zoom call with Zaytun organizers, the main organizer also shared that she felt that the workshops might be accessible to community teachers, but the activities themselves might not be accessible to their refugee students.

The Zoom call highlighted the divide between two white<sup>3</sup> Vassar undergraduate students sitting in their homes and an international NGO (nongovernmental organization) doing ground-level education work with refugees. Though the class strove to close this divide by having the six Vassar students travel to Greece and Zaytun and discussed the importance of context and cultural relevance, we still initially struggled to connect the theory from class to this broader global context by not fully thinking through the relationships among ourselves, the refugees' identities, the work, and refugee education. After the Zoom call, Sophie and Adam revised and reconsidered their approach and pivoted to create three new activities that were more accessible to the language level of Zaytun learners, as well as less focused on potentially volatile identity-based structures. Examples of the new activities were fill-in-the-blank writing, in which teachers give students a template with some words missing. Students could choose which words would complete the sentence, with the possibility of making the paragraphs about certain students.

### RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE IMPLEMENTATION

Overall, we appreciated that the Vassar pilot course was multifaceted, with three core topics integrating theoretical frameworks and practical approaches to pedagogical interventions for displaced students. First, we contextualized the sociopolitical and economic situation in Greece through news sources, studied the transformative role of education in refugee experiences through reports from the United Nations and other NGOs, and engaged with theory on pedagogical practices for forcibly displaced populations.<sup>4</sup> We believe that this part of the course was necessary to ground our curriculum development. As well, we felt that the

<sup>3</sup>It must be noted that the racial background of the Vassar students participating in this course was not majority white, but those working on the *Narrative and Creative Writing* workshop both identified as white.

<sup>4</sup>See Further Readings.

bottom-up approach, where we worked collaboratively alongside each other, our professor, and the host site overseas, modeled how community relationships can be built and potentially sustained. Another key insight we learned in conducting work alongside and with community organizations was the need for constant flexibility and adaptability. As we mentioned, the class had intended to travel to Greece and conduct the workshops with volunteer teachers at the partner organization over a 10-day period in March 2020. However, after the outbreak of Covid-19 and the trip's subsequent cancellation, our group could not fully implement our planned activities.

Much can be learned from the challenges our group faced to better incorporate field work into future courses relating to forced migration. One of our main obstacles was communication difficulties. Due to privacy concerns and the time difference between New York and Greece, much communication between Zaytun and our group was conducted in early mornings or after hours through our advising Professor. Professor Hantzopoulos diligently relayed the plans and requests of the Zaytun organizers and teachers. Similarly, feedback from Zaytun's organizers and refugee teachers were relayed through such meetings. Nonetheless, our Vassar student group was unable to directly communicate with the organization's teachers and students given the time constraints. The general lack of direct communication also contributed to our student group's misunderstanding of Zaytun's students' language levels and needs. Moreover, more direct communication between both groups would have eased the responsibility to transmit information borne by Zaytun's head organizer and Professor Hantzopoulos alone.

While we were all planning on meeting in person, and that portion rapidly shifted overnight, it might be something to keep in mind in the planning stages as well (though none of us could have predicted the sudden global impact of Covid-19). We learned that it is key to build a strong connection between the organizations beforehand to facilitate clear communication. It is also crucial to build interpersonal relationships with organizers and students in advance. Through such dialogue, both groups can establish shared expectations for the forthcoming work, as well as mutual respect and appreciation. Furthermore, direct and ongoing feedback from the partner organization is critical to keep the needs of the community being served at the forefront of the project. Because of on-the-ground realities, we were not always able to get feedback when developing the workshops. We learned that communication delays due to

environmental and technological circumstances, such as unstable Internet and time zone differences, should be anticipated.

Another key recommendation our group proposes for future courses includes lengthening the duration of work and increasing the frequency of meetings. Since our course met weekly over one semester, we feel that more time devoted to planning workshops for refugee teachers and students would have been beneficial. Thus, we recommend shifting to a longer course that may cover multiple semesters or quarters, with students meeting multiple times a week to ensure clear communication and ample time to prepare fieldwork. However, since our group was unable to fully conduct field work due to the pandemic, these recommendations solely reflect what our group imagined would have been more useful if we had had the chance. Moreover, because we were able to provide only one of the three workshops virtually, our evaluations are able to reflect on only some of our work. Nevertheless, we feel that undergraduate students and professors looking to build courses on forced migration that include fieldwork can learn from our experiences.

Overall, the approach of the course also allowed our group to focus our coursework on modifying and creating programs for refugee students based on the needs of Zaytun. Thus, our recommendation for future researchers and educators includes an interdisciplinary framework that centers on the experiences of refugee learners and emphasizes a strong working relationship with a collective or organization on the ground. While there were some glitches in communication, and a global pandemic upended our plans, we did find this to be the heart of the course and something that should be retained. As more higher education institutions attempt to study forced migration and refugee populations, we believe that the experiences of refugee students must be at the forefront, particularly as migration studies continue to gain popular attention. By centering on refugee student experiences, this course aimed to fulfill a proposed goal of higher education by “shap[ing] policies and build[ing] democratic systems of governance by producing researchers, teachers, education practitioners” and other individuals committed to uplifting refugee voices through studies of forced migration (Pherali and Lewis 2019, 6). Centering refugee voices and building global partnerships enable higher education institutions to engage with studies of forced migration in a way that asks students to serve as active participants in global responses to, and discourse on, the subject.



## CONCLUSION

In light of rapidly increasing rates of forced migration around the world, institutions of higher education must develop relevant and socially conscientious studies of forced migration. Through this cohort of six Vassar students, the course's model combined theoretical approaches to education with first-hand understandings of ongoing displacements. We specifically sought to implement restorative justice practices for forcibly displaced peoples through educational workshops, and our partnership with the local refugee-led organization remained the centerpiece of the course's bottom-up structure. Through our suggestions, we promote a similar model for other institutions of higher education to undertake as applied scholarship on forced migration grows.

Moreover, we were given the opportunity to work with refugee educators and students, as well as reexamine pedagogical approaches to teaching about forced migration in the higher education classroom. Specifically, centering personal narratives, elements of field work, and multidisciplinary, culturally aware, layered approaches to forced migration should be the foundation for curriculum building on the subject. For higher education institutions to teach students effectively and holistically about forced migration, it is necessary to ensure that students understand the subject beyond its abstract implications. We hope that our grassroots classroom structure can inspire other students to consider how they might get involved. We benefited from this project immensely and, in some small way, were able to develop curricular resources for a group of students whose educational needs often go unmet.

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# Climate Change, Human Displacement, and STEM Education: Toward a More Transdisciplinary and Inclusive Culture of Science

*Jodi Schwarz*

In this chapter I discuss opportunities for undergraduate education to support STEM scholars and students in centering social justice so that science can more meaningfully address global challenges such as the forced migration of people living in regions on the front lines of climate change. Traditional academic training structures in the STEM fields pose challenges for broadening STEM, so I suggest ideas for academic experiences that incorporate human dimensions into science education. As an example, the *Grand Challenges* program at Vassar College, which I helped found and direct, is an initiative that supports students and faculty in developing perspectives and skills that transcend traditional disciplines and in building community to meet global grand challenges, such as

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climate change.<sup>1</sup> By creating pathways for students, faculty, and staff to form communities of practice, the *Grand Challenges* program examines the culture and practice of STEM fields and seeks to cultivate an *Inclusive Excellence* framework in which science can excel only when its practitioners bring diverse perspectives, lived experiences, knowledges, and skills to solving global challenges.

A major driver of human displacement is climate change, especially the cascading impacts upon coastal cities and communities. As understood by science, these effects—rising sea level, extreme weather events, seawater intrusion, and coastal erosion, among others—threaten the continued stability of coastal cities and towns. Many residents confront the reality that the local physical environment is changing dramatically, making it impossible for them to remain in their homes. According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, rising sea level may displace as many as 40 million people in major cities alone. Human displacement along shorelines is a global emergency, and the need to protect and sustainably manage ocean resources is critical. In small-island developing states, for example, displacement threatens entire economies, communities, and cultures. Many developing nations are located in low-lying regions of the global south, disproportionately affected by tropical storms and sea-level rise.

Science and engineering are necessary for understanding and responding to the challenges of climate-induced migration, yet promising solutions and mitigations cannot arise from them alone. Feasible responses emerge only through effective international collaboration among a constellation of economic, political, scientific, sociological, and cultural stakeholders—plus the communities experiencing displacement (Hind et al. 2015). For scientists and engineers to have a maximal impact in addressing both global and community-level results of climate change, they must become skilled at building collaborations across disciplines and with frontline communities

<sup>1</sup>The *Grand Challenges* program (<https://www.vassar.edu/grand-challenges>) reflects the collective vision and work of an inspiring core leadership team: Chris Bjork, Professor of Education; Jan Cameron, Associate Professor of Mathematics and Statistics; Mary Ann Cunningham, Professor of Geography; Tom Pacio, Co-Director of *Grand Challenges* and Director of Creative Arts & Institutional Grant Innovation; and José Perillán, Co-Director of *Grand Challenges* and Associate Professor of Physics & Astronomy and Science, Technology and Society. The *Grand Challenges* program is supported through a grant from Howard Hughes Medical Institute's Inclusive Excellence program. Vassar *Student Catalysts* include: Nandeeta Bala, Leslie Lim, Clarissa Longoria, Ethan Murray, Yasmin Nijem, Gissette Noriega, Michaela Olabisi, Maya Pelletier, Sohaib Nasir, Reshan Selvavelautham, Nia Smith, and Sara Ziegler.

suffering its repercussions. Undergraduate education can play a central role in helping shape students' vision for the kind of scientist or engineer they wish to become, their skills in addressing multidimensional global challenges, and their expectations that, to do excellent science, they must engage with the social and cultural dimensions of human life.

### BEYOND COLLABORATIVE SCIENCE

As practiced, science and engineering are intensively collaborative. If you pick out an average science research paper from the science literature today, it likely sports dozens of authors, not one. And these co-authors may be located at a dozen different institutions on multiple continents. A study on impacts of rising sea level on migration of urban coastal populations, for example, might involve an earth science lab in Egypt working to understand the dynamics of rising sea level, an ecology lab in Germany working on establishing robust plant communities to protect coastlines, an engineering firm in Brazil developing complex physical structures to combat wave surge, and an agricultural science lab in China working to understand the threat of seawater intrusion. Each of these labs operates within different educational frameworks, different cultures and languages, and different hierarchies of science. Within each lab is another constellation of collaborations and relationships. The lab may be headed by a senior professor who oversees the work of three postdoctoral researchers, two graduate students, and two research technicians, each of whom may be involved in some aspect of this international multidisciplinary project.

To scientists, it is clear that collaborative science/engineering is key to mitigating the impacts of climate change, for example, by designing carbon drawdown systems and developing engineered protection from rising sea levels and other ocean impacts. But the scientific enterprise as a whole does not explicitly value working alongside the very communities who are experiencing the direct impacts of climate change, with the real danger that scientific and engineering solutions may never become successfully implemented in frontline communities due to misalignment between what the scientists/engineers understand and what the community needs. It is one thing to develop breeds of flood-tolerant rice in genetic research labs and another for farmers to incorporate those breeds into their fields when their fields face more severe and frequent flooding.

A major challenge in bringing scientists together with frontline communities is that traditional academic training structures in Western science

remain primarily focused on the acquisition of scientific expertise. Graduate students and postdoctoral fellows cultivate a scientific worldview in the lab and typically work in isolation from larger community systems. As a result, one's conception of what it means to be a scientist often involves deliberate disconnection from the human dimensions of the problem at hand. The "lone scientist" model rewards scientists based on their individual endeavors, even when they engage in broad collaboration with other research groups in different STEM disciplines. While there is a toolkit for intercultural training, it is small. Common practices include exchange of students between labs for reciprocal training in laboratory techniques, obtaining grants to facilitate international collaborations between labs, organization of international conferences, and co-authorship. Typically, these practices do not provide opportunities to collaborate outside the sciences, so it is important to create opportunities for training scientists and engineers to acquire background in two different aspects. First, they must gain expertise working with disciplines outside the sciences. Second, they must develop sufficient interpersonal and intercultural skills to become skilled at collaborating with political, economic, and cultural stakeholders in local communities. This is where revitalized undergraduate science education comes in. We urgently need new models to train future scientists.

### NEW TRAINING MODELS IN STEM: TRANSDISCIPLINARY SCIENCE AND SOCIAL-ECOLOGICAL SYSTEMS FRAMEWORKS

To address the first challenge—collaboration across disciplines—there is growing recognition among STEM graduate training programs that scientists need to become more adept at working within a transdisciplinary framework, in which academic disciplines such as physical sciences, social sciences, and humanities come together with policy makers to develop approaches that address the multidimensional nature of complex problems, for example the urgent global issue of climate-induced displacement (Kopp 2019). For example, the Rutgers University Coastal Climate Risk & Resilience (C2R2) Initiative has launched a new graduate training program that helps science and engineering graduate students cultivate a "whole systems" approach to addressing climate change-induced migration that includes socioeconomic, ecological, and engineering perspectives. Students work in "transdisciplinary" frameworks that transcend traditional academic disciplines by incorporating policy and other practices

that address impacts of climate change on local communities. For example, they gain experience considering how the perspectives of different stakeholders, such as policy makers, engineers, or local citizens, might shape the development and implementation of potential climate mitigation strategies within a local community at risk; they learn how to communicate science to decision-makers; they learn how to work within coastal communities and local stakeholders on issues such as coastal resilience. By developing fluency in transdisciplinary communication, and by working collaboratively with local decision-makers to address flooding, erosion, and seawater intrusion into local communities, scientists and engineers can work to mitigate the threat of displacement in a more holistic way (Major 2021).

To address the second challenge—collaborating with local communities—another emerging approach uses a Social-Ecological System (SES) framework in which scientists work collaboratively within a community setting. This approach helps center the human dimensions (cultural, historical, political, and economic) in seeking mitigation, policy, engineering, or other solutions. In addressing the forced migration of populations away from coastlines, an SES framework would lead to collaborations among scientists, community members, local policy makers, and other directly affected stakeholders. As a result, the environmental management policies or other responses that affect a community can be developed from the perspective and needs of that community (Virapongse 2016).

More deliberate incorporation of SES approaches into scientific research is slowly occurring. Opportunities such as the Social Ecological Systems Training and Education Program (SESTEP) provide formal training and case studies to help practitioners cultivate a systemic worldview, co-development of knowledge, stakeholder engagement, adaptive governance, social and ecological monitoring, and responsive education and training (Kliskey et al. 2021).

## A ROLE FOR UNDERGRADUATE SCIENCE EDUCATION IN SHAPING THE CULTURE AND PRACTICES OF SCIENCE

Given the urgent need to train globally minded, community-oriented scientists and engineers, we must consider how to support undergraduate students in gaining transdisciplinary and social-ecological experience. After all, the training of scientists does not begin in graduate school. Students begin to shape a professional identity as a scientist in college,

where we can make a great impact by helping students understand that science must be situated within a multidimensional perspective. Our academic system still prioritizes and privileges a traditional disciplinary structure in which departments train undergraduate majors within a single discipline, such as “Biology,” “Chemistry,” or “Psychology.” The vast majority of STEM undergraduate programs in the United States focus exclusively on helping students adapt to the existing practice and culture of Western science by focusing on acquiring laboratory, field, and computational science skills. Students internalize these expectations for the scope and culture of science from the pedagogical approaches of STEM courses, the culture of research in faculty labs, and the nature of the science community at their campus. Traditional concepts of “scientific rigor” create a competitive atmosphere in STEM courses, exacerbated by students’ perceptions that introductory offerings are weed-out courses. In such a pedagogical framework, it is challenging to support training in transdisciplinary and social-ecological awareness, because these topics are often seen to detract from science content.

So, how can undergraduate institutions play a role in helping students and faculty engage in science as a global collaborative enterprise that requires diverse disciplines and centers on community needs? How can we help create multiple entry points so that students and faculty alike can develop expertise not only in science, but also in forming equitable partnerships within multinational, multicultural, and multidisciplinary contexts? One approach is to create a broader toolkit of skills and knowledge by helping faculty and students incorporate more explicitly transdisciplinary and SES approaches into their academic training.

At Vassar College, we saw an opportunity to develop an initiative that would engage the entire campus community in fostering an inclusive community of science—one that could respond to complex challenges in ways that were collaborative, transdisciplinary, and engaged with communities as well as scholars. Supported by a five-year grant from the Inclusive Excellence program at the Howard Hughes Medical Institute to foster inclusion, diversity, and equity in STEM fields, we founded the *Grand Challenges* program, in which we engage a series of global challenges that transcend disciplines and cross a multitude of lived experiences. The need for such a program arose both from a desire to develop a new generation of scientists who can operate within both global and local community collaborative structures, and to address the lack of inclusion that many



first-generation and Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) students experience in their studies.

At the core of the *Grand Challenges* program is the formation of a two-year learning hub around a topic of global significance. Our first learning hub (2019–2021) formed around the topic of climate change. The climate change learning hub included (1) introductory courses in STEM, Social Sciences, and Humanities organized around the theme of climate change and taught by faculty committed to fostering inclusive excellence, (2) a professional development program for faculty and staff to develop culturally responsive pedagogies, (3) opportunities for students to catalyze change, and (4) community-building initiatives to bring together students, faculty, staff, and campus in informal social gatherings.

## CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT

Many students come to college not only with an interest in the sciences, but with a passion for helping solve the climate crisis. Yet they often experience introductory-level STEM courses as barriers in their journey to becoming a scientist, engineer, or medical professional. This reaction is partly because the courses' content does not seem directly connected to issues of importance to the students, but also because the perceived difficulty of course material exacerbates the imposter syndrome that many students experience, especially those who do not already feel a strong sense of belonging.

To foster more inclusive classroom cultures that address real-world issues, the *Grand Challenges* program invested in helping support a diverse set of connected courses across the sciences, social sciences, and humanities. These courses explicitly addressed climate change from their own disciplinary perspective. Faculty committed themselves to inclusive practices and participated in our faculty development program. By helping faculty shift pedagogical approaches and by helping students see the direct connection between their class and real-world problems, we aimed to help students feel more welcome in their courses where science intersected with issues of social and environmental justice.

Classes in the learning hub included standard entry-level STEM courses such as introductory Chemistry, Physics, and Calculus, as well as first-year writing seminars in Sociology (*The House is on Fire*) and History (*Climate Change and International Security*). To connect students across disciplines, courses were supplemented with out-of-class lectures and

community events organized by students and faculty, such as GreenFest, a student-organized climate change symposium, and a Coral Reef Expo featuring evocative creatures crocheted during a student winter creative project. By supporting climate action both inside and outside the classroom, and by creating events that brought the humanities together with social science, one outcome has been that students feel more strongly that STEM is a multifaceted endeavor in which inclusivity and justice are foundational components.

Students emerging from these introductory-level courses had access to pathways for continuing their exploration of the intersection of science and social/environmental justice. For example, our campus adopted a new curricular offering called the Intensive, in which a faculty member and a small group of students focus on a topic of mutual interest. The *Grand Challenges* program supported development of the *Creating Communities That Care* Intensive, in which faculty and students explored different dimensions of inclusion. In one iteration, *Creating Community in the Climate Change Movement*, students focused on approaches to building diverse and equitable communities committed to finding solutions for global climate change, and they explored how to apply one's expertise and amplify others' work to build collaborative communities to create change. Students co-created the syllabus for the course, focusing on three areas: Becoming a Transdisciplinary Translator, Finding Your Voice, and Building Community. Students read the work of two scientists who have successfully navigated a transdisciplinary and SES career in climate issues: Ayana Johnson and Bob Kopp. They are PhD scientists who focus their work on the human impacts of climate change, and who have taken different paths that intersect across science and policy. Dr. Johnson leads the Urban Lab, a think tank for developing solutions for climate change, and Ocean Collectiv which seeks solutions to climate change that are founded in social justice. Dr. Kopp is an academic scientist who publishes broadly on the need for scientists to become transdisciplinary translators of climate change action. Both were invited to campus to give a talk and engage in a student-moderated conversation about how to become justice-minded scientists who can collaborate on climate solutions embedded in the needs of affected communities.

Vassar's new transdisciplinary curriculum on *Migration and Displacement Studies* offers our STEM students a new opportunity to directly study how their fields might be involved in addressing the global challenge of forced migration. The new curriculum opens a pathway for

students majoring in traditional disciplines to immerse themselves in courses, experiential work, and capstone projects aimed at understanding and addressing this global challenge. The curriculum integrates theory with practice to enhance classroom learning, translate inert knowledge into action, and promote community partnerships (locally, regionally, and globally). Science majors emerging from introductory courses might take the *Lexicon of Forced Migration* course in the Fall semester of their sophomore year, work with newly settled refugees in the Hudson Valley in the Spring semester, then engage in summer research with science faculty that might then develop into capstone projects. In the summers of 2020 and 2021, for example, students majoring in Psychological Sciences and in Science, Technology, and Society worked as research fellows studying the psychology of trauma in displaced individuals, as part of Vassar's summer Undergraduate Science Research Institute (URSI) and in close collaboration with our consortium partners at the New School (see Adam Brown and Alexa Elias's essay in this collection).

### PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT FOR FACULTY AND STAFF

As educators, academic advisors, and research mentors, STEM faculty profoundly shape students' conception of the scope and culture of science. Helping faculty become more culturally responsive educators who can make social justice an explicit goal of science is a primary objective of the *Grand Challenges* program. This begins with helping faculty reflect on ways to promote a more inclusive and equitable academic environment. For example, in summer 2021, we worked with the Inclusion Diversity Equity Access Leadership Center (IDEAL—<https://www.smm.org/ideal-center>), directed by Liesl Chatman and their team at the Science Museum of Minnesota, to offer faculty and staff the opportunity to develop a cohort of "change agents." In a weeklong workshop, participants engaged critical concepts in systems thinking, systems of oppression, and growth/fixed mindsets, while interrogating their own perceptions of academic culture. Participants also learned to engage in new practices of communication designed to ensure that diverse viewpoints are heard and valued. Through the week, the sense of individual and collective responsibility to challenge inequitable practices within classrooms, departments, and across administrative offices prompted participants to develop actionable plans that included new pedagogical approaches for fostering equity in their teaching, advising, and mentorship. As a result, faculty are testing

ways to engage students in more culturally responsive and equitable pedagogies. For example, faculty are designing small-group work assignments in which the sharing of knowledge and experiences among students is critical. In so doing, faculty help students create a vision of science in which diverse perspectives are necessary for designing robust solutions.

### OPPORTUNITIES FOR STUDENTS TO CATALYZE CHANGE

A major focus of the *Grand Challenges* program has been to support students in broadening the traditional conception of what it means to do science, by creating opportunities for them to become agents of change in the STEM community. We initiated a new *Student Catalyst* summer research program that was run alongside the laboratory summer science program. In the *Catalyst* program, students worked collaboratively with faculty and staff to design research and action projects aimed at identifying barriers to inclusion in STEM, and then develop approaches to remove those barriers. In their work, students learn to engage both the published literature and the impacted community in developing an understanding of the problem at hand and possible solutions. Students' ideas are then developed into pilot programs tested the following academic year. In Summer 2021, student catalysts focused their project ideas on improving the first-year experience, especially for students who are the first in their families to attend college. Using surveys that identified the ways in which students felt a lack of cultural, economic, or academic support, the *Catalysts* devised program ideas to respond. Their projects are now in the process of being implemented through collaborations with departments and other student-facing offices. For example, the Building STEM Community Among BIPOC Students addresses the need to foster a sense of belonging and mattering among students; the First-Year Laboratory Intensive aims to connect students with faculty from diverse STEM fields so that students can experience science labs before they take their first science course; and Textbook Affordability and Accessibility aims to remove the barrier of cost from access to course materials. The skill and creativity of these students—in bridging science and social justice, in bringing together published literature on inclusive education with demonstrated needs of Vassar students, and in navigating the infrastructure and practices of the academic environment—are needed to navigate issues that span science and human dimensions.

## COMMUNITY BUILDING

Embedded throughout the *Grand Challenges* program is an awareness of building community at all levels: among students, staff, and faculty; across disciplines; between the academic community and the broader world. To foster our capacity to build community, we have supported students in creating their own communities (BIPOC in STEM and GreenFest were mentioned earlier); in creating community with their professors through “Catalytic Cafes” in which faculty and students explore what it means to bring one’s whole self to a life in science; in creating community across campus through workshops such as a storytelling workshop in which students, faculty, and staff developed stories about our experiences in science; and in organizing large community events, such as the Coral Reef Expo with over 100 participants crocheting corals for a giant exhibit.

Faculty and students in many Vassar courses and Community Engaged Learning projects work in partnership with local and regional organizations that are beginning to consider how climate change will affect their missions and programs. These partnerships not only build community but also provide opportunities for students to engage in transdisciplinary collaboration and social-ecological systems research.

Vassar students taking a Conservation Biology course or working in collaboration with the Environmental Cooperative at Vassar Farms, for example, work on climate reforestation plans using plant species capable of thriving in local conditions predicted in local climate projections. Students in the Geographic Information System (GIS) mapping courses and entry-level Environmental Studies courses carry out community GIS mapping projects with local organizations, such as in the City of Poughkeepsie. The students’ skills in GIS mapping assist the local community in planning for climate issues, generating greenhouse gas assessments, working toward Climate Smart Community certification, creating natural resource inventories, and addressing Community Preservation needs. In the future, regional projects can be developed to evaluate the likelihood of climate displacement in the Hudson Valley region, and to examine the potential for local areas to serve climate refugees by providing resettlement locations.

The GIS mapping work has been so motivating that Vassar students created the *Hudson Valley Mappers* to engage the local community in

humanitarian mapping projects. This student organization is registered as a campus chapter of Youth Mappers, an organization created in 2015 by the U.S. Agency for International Development GeoCenter to address humanitarian issues. Youth Mappers has become a global network of over 300 chapters in 65 countries (<https://www.youthmappers.org/>). Some Youth Mapper projects address climate-induced displacement, for example, humanitarian aid in response to flooding in India, Sri Lanka, and Japan. Mappers use satellite images of local areas to digitize local infrastructure such as roads and buildings, enabling humanitarian relief teams to accurately estimate the size of affected populations and to determine where households are located and how to reach them.

### CONCLUSION

The displacement of communities due to climate change is a global grand challenge, and science is at the heart of many of the possible solutions—minimizing climate warming, engineering coastal protection, creating resilient economies, and minimizing effects on individuals. But because traditional scientific training offers students few opportunities to engage the cultural and human dimensions of their work, scientists can be ill-equipped to engage in the kind of intercultural, interdisciplinary, and community-based collaborations necessary for tackling climate-induced displacement. At Vassar, through professional development, curricular development, empowerment of student voices, and explicit community building, the *Grand Challenges* program offers one approach to incorporating social and environmental justice into the core of undergraduate scientific training. The scientists who emerge are able to navigate both the scientific and cultural elements of addressing complex challenges. Although founded with the goal of making science a more welcoming and responsive community at Vassar, it has become clear that the *Grand Challenges* program helps faculty and students build community to address climate change across disciplines. By supporting intercultural awareness in STEM fields, we are preparing science majors with experiences, perspectives, and skills to help them become the transdisciplinary and social-ecological scientists and engineers that our world needs.

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# Reading *Eveline* in Jakarta: Community Learning with Hazara Refugees

*Alberto Gelmi and Halima Akhlaqi*

This chapter outlines an intensive class that took place over approximately two weeks in the summer of 2018 at the Cisarua Refugee Learning Center (CRLC), a school in Western Indonesia that serves refugees and asylum seekers, many of whom are Hazaras. The authors met at the CRLC and worked together in the summers of 2017 and 2018. Back then, Akhlaqi was a teacher and the deputy principal of the school; she has now been resettled in Toronto, Canada. Gelmi was one of the many volunteers to visit Cisarua; he ran two workshops on reading and writing skills that Akhlaqi organized as training sessions for teachers, and attended as a student. The class combined language and literacy instruction for ESL learners and also aimed to provide professional development for teachers in the form of metacognitive reflection on the course itself. This article argues that, in this unique scenario, the Humanities and Liberal Arts should take

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the lead as disciplines that teach interdisciplinarity and care for language, the powerful tool that regulates our interactions as individuals and as groups.<sup>1</sup>

### TRAPPED ALL OVER

A better understanding of the social and cultural coordinates of our learning experiment requires a few words about Hazara people and their history of socioeconomic exclusion, geographical dispersion, and intra-communal resilience. Hazaras have been living as a minority group in a vast swath of land that runs through Central Asia (especially Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iran); most belong to Shiite Islam and speak Dari, a language related to Farsi, the official language of Iran.

In Afghanistan, Hazaras were first displaced during the reign of Abdur Rahman (1844–1901) in a campaign of social engineering that favored Pashtun tribes, when the country was just emerging as a nation. Over the past fifty years, the Hazaras faced two major humanitarian crises: the first in 1978 with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the start of the civil war; the second after the 2001 U.S.-led war against the Taliban began. Monsutti and Balci chronicle that in the 1990s, up to 40 percent of individuals under UNHCR protection were Afghan nationals; since the early 2000s, more than four million Afghans have reportedly made their way home, although harassment and violence against Hazara people persist. This essay was written in the summer of 2021, a few weeks before the U.S. withdrawal. The frantic return of the Taliban to power may well count as the third major humanitarian catastrophe in less than a century for the people of Afghanistan.

In Pakistan, Hazaras are listed as indigenous people; for the most part, they live outside refugee camps and participate in the local economy. Here too, however, episodes of violence targeting the Shiite minority are frequent. Finally, also in Iran, the most populous Shiite country in the Islamic world, the situation is far from ideal: the war with Iraq (1980–88) and repeated Western embargoes severely weakened the economy and therefore the demand for an immigrant workforce. Recent developments have eased the situation, especially in matters of education, with refugees allowed in schools (Shammout & Vandecasteele).

<sup>1</sup>The two authors thank Ariel Leutheusser and Victor Xavier Zarour Zarzar, as well as the attentive reviewers, for their feedback.

Like any other refugee group, Hazara refugees are being resettled at a painstakingly slow pace, with projections of even longer waiting times in the future. Over the past decade, UNHCR has been flooded by an exponential increase in cases, mostly due to the Syrian civil war, with fewer countries willing to cooperate in alleviating the crisis.

### EMPOWERMENT THROUGH EDUCATION, EDUCATION THROUGH EMPOWERMENT

Indonesia is a relatively new site of the Hazara diaspora. For many, it is a transit country where displaced Hazaras await resettlement in Australia, New Zealand, the United States, or Canada. To this day, no Indonesian government has signed the 1951 U.N. Refugee Convention, which has resulted in the exclusion of refugees and asylum seekers from the workforce, while also limiting their access to education. Although Jakarta has generally complied with the policy of non-refoulement,<sup>2</sup> until 2016 the country lacked a legal definition for refugees. A presidential decree of the same year produced no major breakthrough in legislation (McConnachie). Despite scenes of jubilation following the rescue of many Rohingya fleeing Myanmar, migration remains a problem in Indonesia. Reports of violence and harassment are frequent, and Hazaras do not feel safe in a predominantly Sunni country that is itself wrestling with its secular legacy and the emergence of religious extremism and regional demands for independence.

Knowing that their stay would not be a short one, members of the Hazara community in the village of Cisarua, fifty miles southeast of Jakarta, began to advocate for the creation of a school for their kids. Women were particularly vocal in this process, while others were doubtful, fearing troubles from the Indonesian government and UNHCR if they started working as teachers. However, since teachers would be serving as volunteers in a school supported by private donations, no law was broken, and after the

<sup>2</sup>The United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner defines the principle of non-refoulement as follows: "Under international human rights law, the principle of non-refoulement guarantees that no one should be returned to a country where they would face torture, cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment and other irreparable harm. This principle applies to all migrants at all times, irrespective of migration status." <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Issues/Migration/GlobalCompactMigration/ThePrincipleNon-RefoulementUnderInternationalHumanRightsLaw.pdf>.

initial show of bravery by their female colleagues, male instructors also joined the school.<sup>3</sup>

This episode shows a recurring frustration among refugees. Left with minimal legal protection and only a little help from international organizations, refugees are stuck in a vicious circle of fear and lack of awareness of their still-limited rights. In the case of CRLC, it was probably the untenable duration of their stay in Indonesia that convinced many to start their own school. This step to self-determined empowerment proved inspiring and led to the creation of many other refugee-led initiatives in the area. The study of refugee rights is currently absent from the curriculum, but the very existence of the school has made students and their families more aware of their status. This has prompted conversations on how to improve life conditions, organize protests, or simply discuss different opinions on the well-being of the community. Also, CRLC has established a network of collaborations with college students, academics, and journalists from overseas who visit the school every year. These exchanges have benefited both sides, providing opportunities to share knowledge, experiences, and skills. These visits, too, have encouraged both young people and adults to investigate and talk more about their refugee status.

Officially, CRLC was founded in August 2014. On the first day of class, a donation of two hundred Australian dollars sufficed to gather eight teachers and forty kids in a small room, with some stationery. Pretty soon, more families enrolled their children, and more school materials were provided. After just a few months, the school moved to a bigger space that could host the now one hundred CRLC students. Parents helped convert a summer house into a school, as told in *The Staging Post*, a documentary by Jolyon Hoff, an Australian filmmaker who enthusiastically supports the center. Twelve months later, two more schools opened in the area, and soon more followed. Refugee-led initiatives now serve approximately 1800 students with more than 100 teachers. Unfortunately, we should not be misled by this powerful example of resilience. For the most part, living conditions for asylum seekers and refugees in Indonesia are still dire, stuck as they are in limbo with little hope and fewer rights. Their stories have only occasionally caught the attention of mainstream media.

<sup>3</sup>Unlike in other locations, teachers are not subsidized by UNHCR. Education, which is inevitably a long-term commitment, is seldom a priority for international agencies that work in emergency contexts. This problem resurfaced as Covid-19 spread around the world.

CRLC has a predominantly Hazara population, but over the years it has also welcomed refugees from Iran, Iraq, Yemen, Sudan, Somalia, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. The language of instruction is English, to allow interactions among students and teachers, and to prepare students for a life in an English-speaking country. Educators and managers are themselves refugees, which gives them firsthand knowledge of the living conditions and hardships of learners and their families.

At the academic level, GED (General Educational Development) is a very popular program at Cisarua. It consists of a set of tests that award a U.S. or Canadian high school diploma equivalency. The refugee centers facilitate several preparation courses for students above the age of eighteen. Students are eager to enroll in these classes because they know that a diploma is a prerequisite for college entrance or a higher-paying job once they are resettled. The function of these centers is not limited to curriculum instruction. Sports, music, vocational training, computer classes, and literacy courses for adults and the elderly are also included. Sports provide entertainment and stress-relief: futsal (a kind of soccer for teams of five players) is now an essential part of refugees' lives. Other sports have also been introduced: boxing, karate, Taekwondo, Muay Thai, and general fitness are especially appreciated by younger members of the community. Music is also in demand, with classes in guitar, piano, and *damboura*, a traditional Hazara instrument.

Most volunteers were never professionally trained to become teachers; the turnover of instructors is often rapid, given the precarity and unpredictability of refugee life. It is essential for each center to implement professional development sessions to assist faculty. As a matter of fact, students are simultaneously learning English and *in* English which, in second language acquisition, is an example of CLIL, Content and Language Integrated Learning.<sup>4</sup> In the past, centers used Australian textbooks donated to the school. Their language, however, required significant adjustments, and the school recently moved to texts specific for learner of English as a second language.

<sup>4</sup>On the complexity of language instruction at CRLC, see Alberto Gelmi, "Teaching Teachers. An experiment in intensive training for educators in a refugee community," *Idee in form@zione* (2019).

SLOW-READING *EVELINE* IN JAKARTA

The main question for the intensive class that is the focus of this chapter was the selection of the core readings. The workshop had to combine language instruction with professional development for teachers. On average, five to seven students participated in this class, scheduled before the first period. The text had to be accessible yet challenging for students, to raise their interest, stir conversations, and prompt critical and creative responses. Before the class, school managers had shared with the instructor the students' language profiles and their plans for professional development. Teachers ranked in the intermediate level of proficiency, with a good command of informal, everyday English; their focus for the two-week project was academic reading and writing, in preparation of the GED exam and in light of the fact that most volunteers interrupted their studies before the end of high school in their home countries.<sup>5</sup>

A delicate matter was whether we should prefer an escapist piece that could offer some relief, or more realistic writing that mirrored the students' predicament. This inevitably dovetailed into a question of power: should learners read Western works of literature, or should they instead look into their own cultures? And what about the culture of the host country? During an informal conversation, students signaled their interest in Western literature. One person justified her preference by mentioning the Charlie Hebdo shooting that took place in Paris only one month after she arrived in Indonesia in 2015. At the time, the student remembered news outlets pointing their finger at the lack of integration of Muslim migrants into French society as a cause for the attack. The episode persuaded her that getting an education while in a transit country was an effective way to expose herself to the culture of her future countries of residence. She argued that reading "Western stories" was an excellent bridge toward the Other.

The choice fell on James Joyce's *Eveline*, a short story from the collection *The Dubliners*. It tells of a young woman, torn between a dull existence with her family in Ireland and a brand-new life in Buenos Aires with her love, Frank. Bittersweet memories of the past will eventually hold her back, as Eveline decides to stay with her abusive father and let Frank go, in the heart-melting closing of the story.

The density of this text and the students' uneven level of proficiency mandated a lower reading speed. Contrary to the academic practice of timed examinations, the class embarked in an experiment of "slow reading." In

<sup>5</sup> Some former students of the school later become teachers themselves.

Thomas Newkirk's definition, slow reading has less to do with actual timing than "with the relationship we have with what we read, with the quality of attention that we bring to our reading, with the investments that we are willing to make" (Newkirk 2012, 2). The new pace allowed us to pause, interrogate, and discuss *Eveline* and her choices, the boundaries of her agency, and the universality of her story. Written in Catholic Ireland a century ago, and now perused in Southeast Asia by a group of Muslim refugee men and women and a white European male facilitator, Joyce's story did not disappoint. *Eveline*'s final acceptance of her fate—her "paralysis"—did stir conversation and resonated within our unconventional interpretive community.

One paragraph at a time, everyone savored the description of environments and characters, coming up with ingenious equivalents for the cultural references mentioned in the story and trying to predict what would happen next. This hands-on approach made it natural for students to engage creatively with *Eveline* as a final project, imagining a different ending to the story. The outcomes included a vendetta-plot featuring the mysterious figure in an old picture hanging in *Eveline*'s living room that a student-writer explicitly modeled after Bollywood blockbusters. Another participant wrote a melancholic piece, acknowledging that there is no real Prince Charming in life, as *Eveline*'s loving boyfriend Frank turns out to be just as possessive and psychologically abusive as her father.<sup>6</sup> In a written reflection at the end of class, this student wrote:

Reading stories is more interesting and engaging than reading articles or political news. The story was narrated in a similar condition as ours. The unhappiness of the main character in her childhood city where she grew up and had memories with her siblings, friends and her mother perfectly connected to our emotions when we left our own home country behind. The difficulty of making a choice between staying or leaving was what we had behind us. *Eveline* left a place where she was not happy, but she still had some bonds. That touched our entire heart and mind.

The pressure underlying text-selection and the stress of contemplating multiple teaching objectives at once were quickly supplanted by the simple enjoyment of storytelling and the human connection that comes with it, when we gave ourselves time to actually listen to the characters and their adventures and misadventures.

<sup>6</sup>For an incredible showcase of literary and artistic talents in the refugee community in Indonesia, see <https://www.thearchipelago.org/>.

## CONCLUSIONS

During and after the Covid-19 pandemic, statistics show, staggering numbers of children and young adults were left with minimal or no access to school during the transition to online instruction. Although the trend is international, things are unsurprisingly worse in developing countries and among refugee communities.<sup>7</sup> We would, however, make an egregious mistake if we held the pandemic responsible for all the shortcomings of our educational systems. As much as literacy rates have risen over the last fifty years, millions of people are still excluded from elementary education, including a disproportionate number of women. Moreover, the complexities of the global economy and world migrations demand higher benchmarks in literacy than the mere ability to read and write. What experts call “functional literacy” is alarmingly out of reach for many citizens who are incapacitated from fully grasping the meaning of a text they need for everyday life.<sup>8</sup>

The Humanities and Liberal Arts can and should inject a sense of primacy for language as the place of interaction among fellow human beings. From elementary school all the way up to college, too often literacy classes are forced to bear a double burden: teaching students how to read and write while also covering a daunting array of world literature. To the contrary, language education should be a shared endeavor on the part of all instructors, in the spirit of groundbreaking initiatives such as the Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC).<sup>9</sup> Born in the 1970s, these programs are based on the assumption that best practices pertaining to reading and writing exceed the specific contents of a given discipline; WAC aims to incorporate into each class moments of meta-disciplinary and metacognitive reflection that are vital for twenty-first-century citizenship.

<sup>7</sup> UNICEF and the United Nations have been drawing attention to this unfolding crisis <https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/03/1086232> (last retrieved: October 2021). Reliable and updated statistics are available on the UNESCO website (<http://uis.unesco.org/en/topic/literacy>; last retrieved: October 2021).

<sup>8</sup> According to UNESCO, functional literacy “refers to the capacity of a person to engage in all those activities in which literacy is required for effective function of his or her group and community and also for enabling him or her to continue to use reading, writing and calculation for his or her own and the community’s development” (<http://uis.unesco.org/en/glossary-term/functional-literacy>, last retrieved: October 2021).

<sup>9</sup> For an excellent introduction to the principles of WAC, see the Open Access materials assembled by Hostos Community College (CUNY): <https://commons.hostos.cuny.edu/wac/> (last retrieved: October 2021).

The slow reading of *Eveline* at CRLC not only exposed students to a literary masterpiece whose main character echoed the students' own sense of disempowerment; it also attempted to provide—in the short time available—the tools to proceed independently to other works and other authors and creatively engage with them. Most importantly, in several moments of pedagogical and didactic exchange, it suggested ways in which students could carry on this work in their capacity as teachers.

Although the combination of literacy, ESL, and teacher training was in a way unique to the CRLC experiment, the interdisciplinarity, the peer-to-peer mentorship, and the integration of content- and language teaching that underpinned it, are pedagogically universal. They foreground learning as a social collaboration in which language is simultaneously a tool and an end in itself. Against this backdrop, literature is an incredible vehicle for interpersonal and cross-cultural dialogue that does not turn a blind eye to the chronic injustices of our world. A sober reminder that, at all latitudes, the Liberal Arts pave the way toward the integral humanism we should still reach for.

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PART V

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Trauma, Memory, Postmemory,  
Healing



# Place-Conscious Education: Teaching Displacement Using Oral Histories in Virtual Reality

*Heather N. Stone*

## ISLE DE JEAN CHARLES

Deep in the bayous of Louisiana lies Isle de Jean Charles, home to the tribe of the Jean Charles Choctaw Nation, made up of the tribes of the Biloxi, Chitimacha, and Choctaw, since the early 1800s. The Chitimacha, who originated in Louisiana, had been forced farther south after their long battle with the French. The Biloxi and Choctaw were forced from Mississippi to Louisiana to escape enslavement, and also because of the intrusion of white settlers and mandated ceding of land. In the early 1800s, the three tribes were distinct and had kept much of their culture intact by isolating themselves from European contact, even if it meant ceding their land. They were seen as “invisible people,” those who kept to themselves to avoid contact with whites. As the remnants of the tribes of the Biloxi, Chitimacha, and Choctaw resettled in Terrebonne Parish, their land encompassed 22,000 acres (about half the size of Washington,

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DC). After their initial displacements, the tribe suffered loss of land again when oil companies dug more than 10,000 miles of canals straight through the wetlands and brought oil rigs to Isle de Jean Charles. Promised repair of wetlands never happened. Isle de Jean Charles has now been reduced to only 320 acres (which is about five and a half times the size of the National Cathedral in Washington, DC), and, in some places, is only a quarter of a mile wide. The impact of global climate change and rising sea levels is yet another threat to this population as the images below illustrate (Figs. 1, 2, and 3).

American Indians have long been an under-represented, almost invisible community to many in the U.S., and the Jean Charles Choctaw Nation is no exception. By using oral history as a method, I have learned and discovered through first-hand accounts of those who have experienced the loss of not only their ancestral land but also their way of life. I also learned of their resilience as they have been forced to adapt their way of life. As Jean Charles Choctaw Nation tribal member Edison Dardar said, “it’s [the Island] maybe not much for some people, but for us, it’s plenty.” Their stories of numerous displacements, which the Jean Charles Choctaw Nation generously shared with me, foreshadow the fate of coastal populations worldwide if the environmental changes wrought by climate change are not addressed.

As an oral historian, I was intrigued by the stories of the people. As an educator, I wanted to teach others by documenting the residents’ voices using their history of place and ancestry and experiences of displacement due to the dramatic loss of land brought on by the destruction of wetlands in the Gulf of Mexico. The tribe has had to continually adapt its lifestyle due to the changes in Louisiana’s coastline over the last seventy-five years.

As a citizen of Louisiana, I am working with the tribe to share their history of displacement. As a professor of pre-service teachers, I see the need to integrate my work into my teaching, so future teachers can share this knowledge with their classes. The path I have taken to achieve the integration is by using virtual reality (VR). By creating virtual reality lessons through 360-degree videos of oral histories with tribal members and modeling land loss in an immersive experience, learning becomes engaging for students. The data collected from initial studies show students who learn about erosion and land loss through the VR experience have a better appreciation for how these abstract scientific terms affect real people.

The class I developed benefited from lessons learned in the Virtual Reality Ecoliteracy Curriculum (VREC) pilot that was created using



**Figs. 1, 2, 3** The impact of rising sea levels on Isle de Jean Charles (Source: Heather N. Stone)



**Figs. 1, 2, 3** (continued)

Unity3D and tested with middle school students in eighth-grade classrooms in Lafayette, Louisiana. That pilot came about because educators believed that Louisiana's students and citizens, who are on the front lines of land loss, need a deeper understanding of their coastal environment. The VREC pilot supported a scientific and technology-centered perspective of ecological issues, and its place-based education model connected students to the environment in which they live.

As students are exposed to nature, they gain connections to the environment, leading to a sense of belonging to the natural world. This, in turn, promotes positive attitudes and behavior that foster sustainable decisions about the environment and its displaced peoples. Undergraduate and K-12 classrooms can promote responsible environmental actions and further sustainability by encouraging students to explore and engage with environmental issues that teach science fundamentals and help students develop critical thinking skills.

Over the past six years, I have developed, implemented, and refined environmental lessons in a virtual reality experience. Then, I tested it with over one hundred middle school students in eighth-grade classrooms in Lafayette,

Louisiana. These lessons were framed to explore the theory of place within a VR environment, informing the design of future educational lessons. Since an analysis of a critical pedagogy of place creates producers rather than consumers of knowledge,<sup>1</sup> my objectives were to discover if these lessons would facilitate a change in learners' (a) environmental knowledge, (b) engagement, and (c) understanding of how affected communities construct a more significant awareness of environmental change.

Feedback and assessment after the pilot revealed that the students gained a unique perspective on the abstract global problem of climate change, which was made concrete by the VREC pilot examining local ecological changes. Middle school students who learn about erosion and land loss through the VR experience better appreciate the effects these abstract scientific terms have on real people.

After gaining permission and support from Chief Albert Naquin, we worked together to tell the story of his tribe and its resilience, through interviews I conducted with tribal members who recounted the stories of their community. In one interview, when asked about how the Island had changed, Jean Charles Choctaw Nation tribal member, Maryline Naquin, shared, "It's changed quite a bit in my lifetime because we did have a lot more land and there was cattle when I was growing up, and we had a lot of fruit trees and pecan trees, which there are no more. And lots of gardens. People made all their own vegetables and things like that. And they could just go out and fish for what they wanted, shrimp and crabs and oysters. They could just go out and get what they needed for the day." Maryline depicts the life of a self-sustaining community that no longer exists. The tribe can no longer live off the land as they once did. Only by collecting such oral histories does a deeper, more complex historical knowledge exist.

In another interview, Jean Charles Choctaw Nation tribal member Chantel Comardelle shared her memories of visiting the Island to see her grandparents, "It was adventurous; it was just a place like no other. I mean you'd drive onto the Island, and it's like you'd drive into somewhere that's totally different, the world stops, you don't know that there's wars and that there's so much social unrest around us. But sadly, its spirit is changing." Chantel's reminiscence demonstrates her spiritual connection

<sup>1</sup>Peter McInerney, John Smyth, and Barry Down, "'Coming to a place near you?' The Politics and Possibilities of Place-Based Education," *Asia-Pacific Journal of Teacher Education*, 39(1): 2011.

to the island, but also her sense of loss as the safe haven she knew as a child and grew up visiting was no longer the same.

I conducted the interviews on the Island with a 360-degree video camera in order to immerse students in what the narrators were saying and what they could see on the Island. Through the VR lessons, middle-school students were to construct knowledge of the Island and make meaningful connections. The students' connections led to the following comments:

- *I learned that it is important to listen to what other people have been through. I like that it felt that I was in the conversation with them.*
- *It was an interesting experience. It made me get a better understanding of the concept of land loss and how people and animals react to it.*
- *I really liked the VR experience. It really helped me understand more because it felt like I was there in the moment. It kind of felt almost like they were talking to me. I would definitely want to learn like this in the future.*

These comments illustrate the unique perspective middle-school students gained when learning about the abstract global problem of environmental issues leading to displacement, emphasizing the examination of local ecological changes. To quantify our research, a control group of students taught with a PowerPoint (PPT) learned the same content as the VR group. There was a positive gain for both the VR and PPT groups. However, the VR group was shown to have gained a higher understanding than the PPT group. Through the lesson creation, I gained insight into ways the VR experience can be expanded to include the development, design, and implementation by undergraduate students in different colleges across the university.

## COURSE CREATION

Emboldened by the experiences in the VREC pilot, I was determined to create virtual reality lessons with 360-degree videos of oral histories of tribal members to describe in their own words how land loss has impacted their lives. In order for this project to work, it would have to be inter- and transdisciplinary. At my own institution, the University of Louisiana at Lafayette, I planned to bring together faculty and students from the College of Education and Human Development (Department of Curriculum and Instruction), the College of Liberal Arts (Department of History), and the College of Engineering (Department of Computer



Science). Implementation would also involve students as researchers and participants. Because of Covid-19, all preparation for this course halted, but I present it here as a model of how new technologies can be used to deepen students' engagement with, and understanding of, rising sea levels and displacement affecting their own communities.

For the course I developed to be implemented (discussed in more detail below), professors and undergraduates in Curriculum and Instruction, History, and Computer Science at my university will bring their unique expertise and methodology to further enrich our understanding of forced displacement. In that manner, the course will straddle the Humanities and STEM fields so that future teachers, historians, and engineers can work together to create VR lesson plans that highlight concrete action to address challenges of displacement.

The course sketched below addresses the *Now What?* question that this collection of essays asks, often echoed by our undergraduates. The class also responds to the call of our students for more prescriptive rather than descriptive classes. Thus, the design envisions undergraduates as full participants in planning and producing the class. Curriculum and Instruction, History, and Computer Science undergraduates all contribute unique skills to this project—they create the lesson plans, collect archival data to complete oral histories and design visuals, and record interviews and construct those visuals—using departmental expertise and methodology. This collaborative approach to instruction enhances areas of study and broadens knowledge of the global issue of forced migration.

### 16-WEEK COURSE: UNDERSTANDING COASTAL DISPLACEMENT USING ORAL HISTORIES IN VIRTUAL REALITY

Under the direction of a professor in Education, Engineering, and History, undergraduates work together to determine a critical focus for their research. The undergraduates investigate what problem or issue they want to focus on. A plan for course creation will have students meeting together in some weeks and working in their respective disciplines.

#### Weeks 1-2

*All:* Choose a narrative thread to illustrate the impact of displacement on the Jean Charles Choctaw Nation community. Complete the Institutional Review Board Application for the project.

Weeks 3-4

- Students in *Curriculum and Instruction*: Determine what grade, standards, and activities align with the chosen topic. Identify a local middle school interested in letting their students participate in the research.
- Students in *History*: Research archival data to determine how to frame the oral history questions and what visuals could be turned into 3-D models to help make the information more engaging and immersive.
- Students in *Computer Science*: Research what software will be used and then begin to create a program that will house the 360-degree oral histories and interactive models.

Weeks 5-6

*Curriculum and Instruction and History*: Conduct oral histories and collect any narrator artifacts that need to be added to the VR environment.

*Computer Science*: Continue to build the program and start to build 3-D models.

Weeks 7-8

*Curriculum and Instruction and History*: Analyze oral histories and edit to use for lesson plan creation.

*Computer Science*: Continue to build the program and 3-D models.

Week 9

*All*: Share each group's progress and make a final plan of which oral histories and artifacts will be used to create the lesson plans.

Weeks 10-12

*Curriculum and Instruction and History*: Create a pre- and posttest to gauge the effectiveness of the lessons and make final arrangements with the partner school for implementation.

*Computer Science*: Embed 360-degree videos and finish 3-D models.

Week 13

*All*: Debug VR lessons and demonstrate within the class and other undergraduate students (these could be friends of students in the class or students in other classes of the professors that are interested in the subject and would like to participate in helping to debug).

Week 14-15

*All*: Implement lessons into chosen K-12 classrooms.

Week 16

*All*: Analyze data from pre- and posttest and debrief.

## CONSIDERATIONS

A few things immediately come to mind when planning to undertake such an important but logistically complicated project. First, it can be hard to get three professors from different disciplines to form a cohesive project for their students. The professors of each discipline will need to think strategically about how they will teach the method of oral history, lesson creation, and programming in such a short time. The short-term goal is to create the lesson, but in the long term, the goal is to teach undergraduates about what is going on in their communities and what actions they can take to make a difference. Another challenge is for universities or colleges to acknowledge the extensive time commitment to develop and teach such a class, and to grant course credits to all three faculty.

## CONCLUSIONS

First-hand, place-based, immersive experiences, as described earlier, are an ideal means of deep learning. To gain a complex historical perspective of the world, one must observe the layers created in documenting and telling stories from different contributors. Teaching displacement using oral histories in virtual reality supports a scientific, technology-centered perspective on ecological issues. With a class such as this one, direct exposure to personal immersive experiences allows for the development of ethical, emotional, and social connections to sustainability issues. The lessons provide an engaging way to learn about the environmental impact on affected communities. Students in such immersive learning experiences can absorb, understand, and think critically about how human activities and natural phenomena intersect to affect community resilience and sustainability.

When Chief Naquin was asked about the impact of the oil companies on the Island, students learned that, “They affected the Island plenty, a whole bunch. Our first oil well was right next to my house. They dug a pipeline to come from Montegut, and they went all the way to where the drilling rig was at.” But Jean Charles Choctaw Nation tribal member Chantel Comardelle also stressed their resilience in the face of this encroachment. Asked what others should know about the tribe, she replied, “The most important thing. That we are here, and we’re just trying to keep our future alive. We’re not trying to gain. We’re just trying to live.”

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# Learning at the Borders: How an Experiential Learning Course in Bern, Switzerland, Transformed Undergraduate Learning About Memory, Mental Health, and Displacement

*Adam D. Brown and Alexa L. Elias*

Migration journeys, especially in the context of forced migration, are often associated with exposure to high levels of stress, adversity, and unstable conditions. Displacement from one's home often significantly affects one's sense of self-identity and life story, and is accompanied by a rupture from many of those things—materials, spaces, relationships—that provide perspective, insights, and a sense of self-continuity. In addition to objects and spaces, self-identities are also constructed from cognitive processes, which give rise to internal representations and beliefs of where we come from,

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who we are today, and where we might be going in the future. These representations emerge in part from memories accumulated throughout one's life.

Memories, however, are not influenced solely by the mind. They are supported and shaped by cultural, contextual, and temporal factors. How, then, does one's sense of who they are change when access to familiar and deeply personal contexts are no longer accessible? How much does one forget when separated from the places that activate certain memories? How are memories influenced and altered when one begins to bring elements of the past into new spaces and contexts through the course of migration(s)?

While such questions have long been at the heart of some branches of scholarship (e.g., memoirs, art, history), the study of memory in relation to places is itself still very new. Further, how displacement from spaces impacts memory is understood even less. A better understanding of how memory and displacement interact will reveal not only important insights into the blurred lines between what takes place in our minds and beyond our bodies, but also a deeper appreciation of how displacement affects our most intimate ways of understanding who we are.

In this chapter, we will introduce some of this groundbreaking new research, while also suggesting pedagogical models of bridging diverse fields and involving undergraduate students in scholarship on trauma and forced migration. Our work in the Consortium on Forced Migration, Displacement, and Education (CFMDE) has at its core a belief that introducing students to this kind of work only at the graduate school level is detrimental to fostering interest and commitment to this kind of work, which is needed now, more than ever, given the global crisis of displacement.

The history of human memory research among those who study psychological processes, and more recently neural processes, has focused on the de-contextualization of remembering from the world which it inhabits (2019).<sup>1</sup> That is, while subjectively individuals recognize the great extent to which one's environment plays a role in shaping how, what, and when people recall the past, efforts to align psychology with basic natural sciences contributed to decades of research in which investigations of memory were significantly devoid of worldly context. Experiment after

<sup>1</sup>Roediger, Henry & Yamashiro, Jeremy. (2019). History of Cognitive Psychological Memory Research. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108290876>.

experiment consisted of individuals, alone, recalling lists of words, strings of numbers, and arrangements of figures. It wasn't until the study of autobiographical memory that the field explicitly recognized memory as being situated in one's environment. Autobiographical memories refer to a class of long-term memories, believed to be central to one's personal life story. These are comprised of both semantic (e.g., general facts and knowledge) and episodic (e.g., visual details, emotions) details. Research into the study of autobiographical memory has illuminated a variety of ways in which the structure and functions of our personal pasts bear on how we come to understand ourselves and others, as well as affecting our emotional well-being. For example, studies have found that difficulty recalling specific autobiographical memories is highly associated with mental health conditions, such as depression and posttraumatic stress disorder.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, there is a growing body of work that illustrates the functions of autobiographical memory—that is, individuals do not simply recall events; they do so to aid in making decisions, building and nurturing relationships with others, and maintaining a sense of continuity over time.<sup>3</sup>

Understanding how autobiographical memories are impacted, shaped, and linked to well-being in the context of movement and migration is less understood. Yet, movement seems to have an important effect on how people cognitively structure the past. Numerous studies have found that memories of movement, such as moving to a new house or town when someone is a child, are often the earliest events adults can recall. Moreover, the “reminiscence bump,” a phenomenon that has been replicated in numerous studies, indicates cross-culturally that people are more likely to recall more events from their late childhood and early adolescence, in part because this period involves frequent life transitions, such as moving.<sup>4</sup> This line of work has also revealed that migration contributes to additional reminiscence bumps outside of late childhood and early adulthood among people who move more than once in their lives.

One reason why mobility, voluntary or forced, increases the salience of these autobiographical memories throughout our lives is because it

<sup>2</sup>Lapidow, E. S., & Brown, A. D. (2015). Autobiographical memories and PTSD. *Comprehensive Guide to Post-Traumatic Stress Disorders*, 131–146.

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<sup>4</sup>Koppel, J., & Berntsen, D. (2015). The peaks of life: The differential temporal locations of the reminiscence bump across disparate cueing methods. *Journal of Applied Research in Memory and Cognition*, 4(1), 66–80.

disrupts self-continuity. Even in the most benign of contexts, movement and mobility disrupts the patterns, habits, and rituals we perform every day. Over time, one's sense of self becomes deeply intertwined with the enactment and engagement with the familiar. Patterns, when repeated again and again, facilitate a deep fluency and ease with which one navigates public and personal spaces. When a person moves to New York City, they might remember their first taxi ride, but after a few years, riding in a taxi becomes a general category of information with many rides blurring into one another in the absence of surprise or novelty.

For the field of autobiographical memory to truly capture the impact of displacement on cognition, research must begin to encompass the spaces themselves—the spaces in which memories are formed and also lost. The aforementioned shift from “the lab” to “the wild” has been pushed again by scholars and students of cognition to consider how our materials, built environments, and technologies shape our thinking and memory. Rather than considering cognition as something that begins and ends with a neuron, the study of cognition has increasingly recognized the myriad ways that thought is supported and shaped by everything from our smartphones to the placement of dishes in our pantry. Consider the example of someone who has lived in the same apartment for decades. She can easily recall where to find certain pots and linens. Then imagine that same person moves into a new home. For the first few months, she may find herself inhibiting motor responses as she reaches for shelves that are in a different location. Maybe the ease in which she could multitask while preparing dinner suddenly becomes something that deserves all her attention. Her ability to recall information may not have changed from one apartment to the next, but for anyone who has moved domiciles, the transition to a new space immediately reminds us that our cognitive functions are intimately connected to our built environments.

Similar to spaces, people rely on each other to recall memories of their own past. Studies with families, long-term couples, sports teams, and other well-defined groups have shown that under certain conditions, people are able to recall significantly more collectively than they can alone, a phenomenon referred to as transactive memory.<sup>5</sup> For example, one study asked older adults in long-term relationships to recall personal memories by themselves (the more traditional method of assessing memory abilities

<sup>5</sup>Hirst, W., & Manier, D. (2008). Towards a psychology of collective memory. *Memory*, 16(3), 183–200.



in psychology).<sup>6</sup> The researchers then asked couples to recount shared personal stories together. In many cases, collaborative recall boosted the overall cognitive performance of the couple. In contrast, studies have also documented a decline in well-being and cognitive functioning after the loss of a significant other. While some of this decline may be attributed to a wider decline in health or emotional well-being, it may also be that some memories are no longer accessible because they resided in the relationship between the couple.

We hypothesize that the same is true when it comes to displacement and forced migration. Like relationships, our celebrations, milestones, tragedies, and accomplishments are often linked to the places in which they occur. We also use spaces like memories, in that we might visit certain places because we know they will remind us of certain times and instantly repair our mood; after a hard day, one might visit a particular restaurant because the year before it was the location of a joyous celebration. Not to mention one's home and the memories that may be evoked by each room, photos and art adorning the walls, specific smells, sounds such as music, creaks in a floor, and idiosyncratic doorknobs and drawers. Events, experiences, and emotions accumulate and become associated with our spaces. Over time, our spaces trigger memories and remind us of those moments. What happens to our autobiographical memories of those important events when those powerful cues are gone? How is our identity shaped when people are displaced from their built environments and the place itself becomes a cognitive representation? To date, we do not know. What we do know, however, is that we have witnessed, and will continue to witness, unprecedented human migration as result of political, social, and environmental crises. When we consider the many costs incurred by forced migration, we must consider the potential loss of autobiographical memories—memories that are active and come alive when we interact with certain spaces.

We also need to learn more about how built environments become abstracted, integrated, and shared over time through memory practices. It is clear that moving looms large in the histories of individuals, and these types of memories are disproportionately transmitted. A study done on

<sup>6</sup>Barnier, A. J., Priddis, A. C., Broekhuijse, J. M., Harris, C. B., Cox, R. E., Addis, D. R., ... & Congleton, A. R. (2014). Reaping what they sow: Benefits of remembering together in intimate couples. *Journal of Applied Research in Memory and Cognition*, 3(4), 261–265.

intergenerational transmission of family stories found that individuals whose parents had emigrated from a country with violent political upheaval often recalled stories relating to immigration when asked to recount a few of the most important events in one of their parent's lives.

An ongoing study at our Trauma and Global Mental Health Lab investigates how family background knowledge may impact well-being in young adults, and, specifically, how the psychological impact of this knowledge, the narrative theme, and the gender of the family member and participant may be interconnected. Preliminary findings from our study demonstrate that migration is central to life stories: more than fifty percent of participants mentioned moving homes at least once when asked to describe ten of the most important events in one of their parent's lives. The sharing of migration stories may be less frequent and complicated when it occurred in the context of displacement. In recent work, people varied widely in their decision to share or not share memories of their lives before and during migration. Parents often struggled with what to say and how much, especially when such stories are interwoven with trauma and loss. Interestingly, we are finding that children are curious about these stories but at times struggle with how to ask about the unknowns of their parents' pasts. Silences lie between generations and families unsure how to navigate these narrative cognitive divides. We have some preliminary data showing that such silences may negatively impact mental health across generations. Finding ways to share these stories may help to mitigate stress and increase self-esteem. Future work, we hope, will guide how migration stories may be brought into the therapeutic context.

Although human memory research tends to happen in the fields of psychology and brain sciences, answers to such complex questions will require a broader set of frameworks and methodologies to understand the nuances of how cultures, materials, and histories provide contexts and cues for shaping, facilitating, and inhibiting the retrieval of one's personal past. Growing fields, such as *Memory Studies*, encourage interdisciplinary and cross-disciplinary approaches to the ways in which individual processes may interact or may be informed by social, collective, structural, technological, and material influences. Despite the rise of academic conferences and journals that seek to promote cross-disciplinary dialogue and research in memory wholly integrating, adopting, and incorporating interdisciplinary methods—especially those that connect the arts and humanities with social and biological sciences—disciplinary silos continue to be barriers to scholarly work.

One path that may help to address some of these long-standing challenges is through pedagogy and curriculum development that emphasizes and even encourages the inclusion of texts, models, and learning experiences spanning multiple approaches to memory. In higher education, the biggest impact may come from developing undergraduate courses and learning experiences. By the time individuals reach the graduate, postdoctoral, and faculty levels, they have already identified a line of research and may not have time to pursue newer or burgeoning fields. Also, academic institutions and structures may not reward (e.g., promote or award tenure) for developing new ideas compared to building on well-charted, established areas of inquiry. However, for these reasons and others, undergraduate courses, especially those in the liberal arts, offer an ideal context for breaking down these silos and developing curricula drawing on readings and methods from across the many fields researching memory. Currently, there are reading groups, organizations, and graduate seminars seeking to address such questions, but they are mainly at the graduate level and above, and far less is known about the development of memory studies courses for undergraduates.

One way to approach building new academic learning and research in this area is through experiential learning experiences in which students can begin to explore an area of memory through multiple lenses. In fact, CFMDE was an ideal context to begin to develop and implement such a course. As discussed in several chapters in this book, CFMDE is a multisite consortium seeking to create new forms of undergraduate learning, research, and knowledge production around issues of migration and forced displacement. Among the many innovative projects, events, and courses that have emerged as part of CFMDE is an experiential course in which students spent four weeks conducting summer research about the mental health and well-being of individuals affected by different forms of displacement. An important aspect of this work considered how memory, in its many forms, contributes to the mental health outcomes and impacts of forced migration on the lives of individuals and communities.

The focus, format, and work of this experiential course have been evolving and changing over the past few years in response to the political and social exigencies and the profound impacts of the pandemic on how learning occurs. In its first year, six undergraduate students and two graduate students from liberal arts institutions spent four weeks in Bern, Switzerland, working on a series of projects in collaboration with the Department of Emergency Medicine at the University of Bern. In many ways, it was an

ideal context for delving into such questions regarding memory and displacement, as students had the opportunity to combine various forms of learning, research, and inquiry. This ranged from reading scholarly work of various disciplines, to observing medical staff and individuals in asylum centers work with individuals seeking asylum. Students also visited and interviewed individuals from international organizations, such as the World Health Organization (WHO) and United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). During the four weeks, students discussed and learned different methods for collecting and analyzing narrative data from interviews that spanned multiple disciplines. Meetings were also held with public health experts as well as practitioners who provided important cultural and historical context to inform their learning and understanding of complex factors shaping the lives of immigrants and asylum seekers in Switzerland. Although didactic learning played an important role in the course, the most transformative work took place when students divided into small groups and had the opportunity to develop their own research proposals.

The projects clearly illustrated how undergraduate students are poised to draw on bodies of work from multiple perspectives in their research, and it also opened important learning opportunities between undergraduate and graduate students. In addition to formal ways in which the undergraduates learned from the graduate students (e.g., didactic lectures), there was also a considerable amount of informal learning happening, for example, about professional development and applying to graduate schools. As a result, a naturally occurring mentorship model emerged that further strengthened this community and expanded the scope of learning opportunities. At the end of the research project, the undergraduates were invited to present their proposals at the United States Embassy in Bern. Each group delivered a presentation and engaged in high-level discussion about their proposals. Their proposals reflected deep engagement and multiple disciplinary perspectives, and underscored the importance of how memory, in complex ways, is a critical dimension to the conceptualization, development, and implementation of health-based strategies for individuals and communities impacted by displacement.

Like many academic programs that involved travel and experiential learning (especially ones located in Departments of Medicine), the pandemic was an insurmountable obstacle for continuing our direct travel to Bern in 2020 and 2021. However, like so many academic programs, we adapted and found ways to continue learning remotely. The work in recent

years has continued to focus specifically on displacement and mental health in general. Most important, the focus on memory became even more central to the work carried out among students.

In 2020, undergraduate and graduate students worked together to develop a mobile app that used people's memory to help maintain a sense of self-efficacy during a time when students, especially international students, were feeling displaced and cut-off from their academic institutions. The research project was conducted with partners from the University of Zurich, and again, as in the inaugural summer, undergraduates incorporated what they were learning from multiple disciplines and directly contributed to the project while simultaneously working and meeting regularly with graduate students and faculty from other universities. This provided rich opportunities for cross-cultural, cross-institutional, and cross-disciplinary exchange. The development of this app in 2020 is now being written up for publication, and a second study is being carried out between schools in New York City and Zurich.

Working remotely, students worked on a project examining the potential mental health benefits of knowing intergenerational stories and histories within one's family in the context of Covid-19, especially among individuals with personal or family histories of adversity and displacement. Several important elements of this experience must be noted. First, the study of intergenerational memories and narratives lent itself to incorporating texts, theories, methods, and conceptual frameworks beyond psychology. Although the primary bodies of literature drew from psychology, they were not limited to this field. For example, some of the literature also examined gender, and, as a result, students' further research on gender and narrative became critical to their study of culture in relation to storytelling and silence. Second, as in previous years, given the experiential nature of this work, there was a noticeable progression over the summer of ownership and autonomy among the students. Initially, learning happened primarily through direct instruction, but by the end of the project the undergraduates were employing new skills and techniques to research, analyze, and interpret data. Finally, and perhaps most important, there was a wonderful mentorship arc bridging all three years. One of the individuals who participated as an undergraduate student in the first year, now a graduate student in Global Mental Health in the UK, became the primary mentor for the undergraduates this past summer. Students have presented their work at international conferences and also continued working together as a team. Our adapted remote research has informed how we

have structured and designed our planned return to in-person learning in Bern in 2022.

It goes without saying that memory is a complex construct. It can be defined, studied, and analyzed in numerous ways and at different levels of analysis. Memory lies at the heart of diverse areas of scholarly work, but this work occurs not in ivory towers alone. What memories are, how they are used, and who has access to them reflect not only who we are, but also the key issue of any cultural and historical period. We will, however, continue to limit our ability to support people and communities, especially those who have been displaced, if we continue to treat cognition and memory as either entirely in the head or in culture. While we are certainly not the first to call for an important shift toward more dynamic, interdisciplinary approaches, we believe that this work will be sustained only by academic programs and pedagogy grounded in experiential learning for undergraduates.

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# Rebuilding After War and Genocide: Learning with and from Refugees in the Transnational Digital Classroom

*Matthew Brill-Carlat and Maria Höhn*

The Covid-19 emergency spurred a flurry of teaching innovations as higher education institutions turned to online or blended learning models, and as international collaborations have moved nearly entirely online. These circumstances inspired us to revisit the digital transatlantic seminar, “Germany 1945: History and Memory in Germany after WWII,” taught by Höhn in Spring 2018 to a group of seven Vassar students (Brill-Carlat among them) and six advanced high-school students—between the ages of 17 and 22—who had come to Berlin as asylum seekers from Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan. The course dealt with history and memory of World War II and the Holocaust in Germany. As such, it reflected a core commitment of the Consortium on Forced Migration, Displacement, and Education (CFMDE), founded by Höhn at Vassar and partners (Bard, Bennington,

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Sarah Lawrence, the New School, and the Council for European Studies): the importance of providing opportunities for our undergraduate students to learn *with* and *from* refugees and displaced individuals if they are to understand and tackle the global, multidimensional challenges of forced migration. As institutional resistance to digital teaching necessarily vanished with the Covid-19 pandemic in Spring 2020 and the direction of future online-learning policies is up for debate, we revisit the 2018 class to examine lessons learned and how this project points the way to another digital venture: digitally “hosting” displaced scholars at liberal arts campuses.

At Vassar College, online learning was frowned upon as contrary to the college’s liberal arts tradition until Covid-19 forced faculty and administrators to shift course dramatically. Höhn had managed on two occasions to overcome this institutional resistance to virtual education. In 2005 and 2008, she taught a class on “Holocaust History and Memory in the U.S., Germany, and Israel” that brought together Vassar students and German students from the Department of Jewish Studies at Potsdam University and the Moses Mendelssohn Zentrum in Potsdam, Germany.<sup>1</sup> Those two classes were rewarding for all involved, but they were also expensive, elaborate endeavors that would have been impossible without generous financial support from Vassar alums. None of our schools was equipped to facilitate this unusual class at the time, making it necessary to rely on the one video-conferencing space each school had, largely reserved for administrative purposes. Through video calls, the German and American instructors taught a weekly multidisciplinary seminar. The class also included in-person visits, first from the American students to Berlin, for two weeks. A few weeks later, the Berlin students came to visit Vassar during their semester break to visit sites of memorialization and research related to the Holocaust.

The virtual course in Spring 2018 was a way to use technological advances since 2008 to capture the spirit and excitement of these previous seminars, in service of two main objectives. First, we strove to achieve our goal of creating a forced migration curriculum (through the CFMDE) that asks Vassar students to learn with and from displaced students. Second, we wanted to gauge whether such a class could help young

<sup>1</sup>Harry Bruinius, “American and German students take cross-ocean class on the Holocaust,” *Christian Science Monitor*, 7 May 2008, <https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Europe/2008/0507/p20s01-woeu.html>.

students with a forced migration background to advance their educations (and English skills) and gain a better sense of their new home country: by understanding Germans' concern with their country's Nazi past and why that past is so indelibly imprinted onto the cityscape of Berlin. Later in the chapter, we present feedback and reactions from the students, as well as lessons learned by the instructor, to evaluate our success on this count.

The course was also inspired by the belief that education and scholarly exchange have long been building blocks of democratic renewal and preserving democratic traditions. For example, American universities were important to Germany's reconstruction after WWII, and institutions such as the UNRRA (United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration) University in Munich employed hundreds of U.S. and refugee scholars as well as those who had survived the Holocaust, to teach thousands of Holocaust survivors and refugees in the aftermath of WWII.<sup>2</sup> In this spirit of learning together, we were inspired to find creative ways to expose American students to refugee/migrant knowledges in a class environment that stressed learning with and from each other, especially after the Trump administration's dramatic curtailment of the refugee program and its assault on asylum laws.

## THE COURSE

The course introduced American students and displaced students in Berlin to the long process of what Germans call *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, or the “coming to terms with their past,” and to how the memorialization and commemoration of the murderous Nazi past and the Holocaust, in particular, are embedded in the cityscape of Berlin. Given the situations of the refugee students, who had escaped war-torn societies, the class also mobilized two of the big lessons of postwar German history—that rebuilding a country after war *is* possible, and that there *is* a precedent in Germany of welcoming large numbers of refugees in the past—to educate and energize the students in Berlin and Poughkeepsie alike.

We settled on doing a pilot in Berlin for two reasons. Berlin offered the necessary stable Internet environment for the class, as Consortium member Bard College Berlin made a classroom available to us. In addition, we

<sup>2</sup>Anna Holian, “Displacement and the Post-War Reconstruction of Education: Displaced Persons at the UNRRA University of Munich, 1945–1948,” *Contemporary European History*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (May, 2008), 167–195.

knew we had an engaged partner in the German student-founded *Schüler Treffen Flüchtlinge* (STF: Students Meeting Refugees) initiative, founded by Joshua Kriesmann in 2015 when he was in high school.<sup>3</sup> STF had been a frequent collaborator in our own students' efforts on behalf of refugees.

Not surprisingly, teaching such a class presented numerous challenges, given the circumstances that displaced students face: recent trauma of war, dangerous flight, displacement, uncertainty of asylum status, interrupted education, navigating two new languages (German and English) at the same time, and trying to make home anew in a foreign land. With this in mind, we decided early on that this could not be a full-semester class (the students in Germany attended this class on top of their regular course load). We chose the format of a six-week "pop-up" class. The syllabus was adapted from a course taught by Höhn at Vassar in years past.

After discussing the teaching goals with STF leadership, designated mentors Helen Schmitz and Gina Kriesmann selected refugee students at a Berlin Gymnasium whose English was appropriate for the sort of exchange we had in mind. They also helped the students (Ali, Nagibullah, Mohammad, Hani, Bassam, and Sam<sup>4</sup>), who lived in different parts of the city, to travel to the Bard campus located in Pankow, an outer borough of Berlin. They also provided them with additional academic coaching. Class was held once a week for two hours via Zoom with the full cohort of Vassar students (Matthew, Mojan, Zoë, Sabrina, William, Sasha, and Joan). In addition, tandems of one Vassar student and one Berlin student video-chatted once a week outside of class.

Aware of the structural asymmetries between the Vassar students and the displaced students in Berlin, Höhn raised money from alums and friends to purchase iPads for the Berlin-based students to use for the one-on-one video calls (STF kept the iPads for use in future classes). The iPads were also central to another component of the class. Every week, the students in Berlin digitally brought Vassar students to designated sites of commemoration in Berlin's rich landscape of memorial culture: the Holocaust memorial, the Berlin Wall memorial, Topography of Terror, the book burning memorial on August Bebelplatz, and the Neue Wache. In that manner, the Berlin-based students were able to share their particular knowledge of being in a space instead of just reading about it or seeing images of it—bringing specialized knowledge to class discussions that the

<sup>3</sup> Schüler Treffen Flüchtlinge, <http://www.stfberlin.de/>.

<sup>4</sup> In order to protect the students' safety and privacy, we are using only their first names.

Vassar students would otherwise not have access to, thereby unsettling the humanitarian hierarchies often embedded in nominally “equal” exchanges between privileged Westerners and displaced people from the Global South. For the new Berliners (as well as for the STF mentors), it was also a way to explore and discover their city from a wholly different perspective.

We quickly discovered which concepts translated readily to the transnational format, and which required innovation to fit different levels of educational preparedness. Throughout, Höhn engaged in discussions with our STF partners in Berlin and the two groups of students themselves, to gauge their progress. One particular concern of Höhn’s was whether students who might have been exposed to war and violence could be re-traumatized by the topic at hand. She did, however, want to share historical footage of Europe’s destroyed cities after the war. After a long conversation, the Berlin mentors (who consulted with the students) assured her that the students were fine with such footage. If anything, they were puzzled by Höhn’s suggestion of a trigger warning, but in the end Höhn gave one to the whole class.

Höhn wanted to teach the class like a typical Vassar seminar-style class with lots of student engagement, and recruited the students as partners in ensuring the success of the course. Both the students at Vassar and in Berlin understood that this was a pilot intended to figure out the nuts and bolts of such an exchange, with an eye to carrying out similar classes with students in refugee camps and around the world (the Vassar students who enrolled did so under the title “Building the Digital Classroom”). Neither Vassar nor the instructor had a Zoom account at this point (oh, the innocence!), and we struggled mightily learning the new technology after the college bought us an institutional subscription. The Vassar students received college credit for the class, but the Berlin cohort did not because they were not enrolled in a college. We hope to run credit-bearing classes in the future.

On a week-to-week basis, Höhn altered her typical class rhythm in order to help the Germany-based students who had had their educations disrupted, were new to the liberal arts college model, and were being asked to work academically in a third (or fourth or fifth) language. Structurally, that meant that assigned readings had to be reduced. In addition, Höhn prepared PowerPoint presentations with text, maps, and images that students and their mentors could consult before class. This helped them prepare in advance for an English-language discussion of

complex topics. If memorials had inscriptions, Höhn provided both the German and English language texts. Historical footage illuminated for the students the utter destruction of Berlin in 1945, but also gave a glimpse of the hundreds of thousands of refugees and displaced persons living in the rubble of the city. Historical film footage also brought home to the students the reality of the Berlin Wall, of which, thirty years after its destruction, only a few small sections remain standing as memorials.

### BILATERAL LEARNING

The class was supposed to expose all of us to new insights, and we were not disappointed. Historical footage sparked different responses in the two groups of students, but also offered new educational perspectives for Höhn. Watching the clips of the destroyed city of Warsaw, and then Berlin—to make clear that the fighting was started by German aggression—was a sobering moment for the American students. Despite their perceived “familiarity” with the history of WWII due to popular culture, few Americans understand the full scope of prolonged carpet bombing or intense ground warfare. The Berlin cohort watched the footage of Warsaw and Berlin quietly; perhaps the sight of flattened buildings and deserted, rubble-strewn streets was familiar enough that they could grasp what must have happened. However, when Höhn showed twenty-first-century photographs of the same blocks and landmarks in Berlin that had been pummeled by bombs during WWII, they were astounded to see how the city had recovered. They, like the Vassar students, internalized the calamity of the bombings, but they, perhaps more than the Americans, were heartened that a new and thriving metropolis could arise out of such destruction. If Berlin could be resurrected, why not Aleppo, or Mosul, or Kabul? “We can do this too,” said one student from Afghanistan. Another said it made her feel more at home in Berlin, and gave her confidence that she could rebuild her own life in a rebuilt city.

If one lesson from the Munich University after WWII is that “international contact and collaboration,” especially in humanist-oriented projects, “were needed to build a sturdy post-war peace,” then cross-border partnerships grounded in the liberal arts are still necessary to establish global comity.<sup>5</sup> We also need these partnerships to ensure that displaced

<sup>5</sup> Holian, “Displacement and the Post-War Reconstruction of Education,” 170.

people can equip themselves with the intellectual and technical tools necessary to lead reconstruction efforts in their homelands.

Other class sessions similarly prompted both groups of students to reach different conclusions. The fact that the Allies converted former concentration camps or SS barracks into refugee and displaced persons (DP) camps for survivors after WWII shocked the Vassar students. The Berlin students, more accustomed to a wide variety of shelters—and unburdened by American mythology about the end of WWII and instantaneous “liberation”—were less surprised. They responded pragmatically to the use of such emergency shelters.

The visual memory culture around the Holocaust that has emerged in much of the West did not evoke the same resonances among our Berlin-based students. For example, when we looked at the memorial at the Dachau concentration camp, they did not “read” the abstract depiction of tortured and starved bodies intertwined in barbed wire—one student saw guns, another saw bones, and a third saw people fighting each other. The lesson for the Vassar students was that the Western visual vocabulary of the Holocaust in which they have been immersed is not universal.

The Berlin-based students had a wealth of knowledge, acquired from their schooling and life experiences, that the Vassar students did not have—and vice versa. Sometimes it was a matter of explaining certain American English idioms, but occasionally the situation required a more intensive, deeply rewarding process of bridging the gaps between the two frames of reference. The Berlin-based students had fresh perspectives on how to memorialize mass suffering and destruction, while at the same time moving on and healing societal wounds. As one Vassar student put it, “It’s easy for me to sit in twenty-first-century America and chastise 1950s Germany for papering over the full extent of the country’s crimes in order to rebuild first. But my partner in Berlin told me that he wants new schools, rather than punishments for former ministers, to be the priority when he returns to a peaceful Syria.” This Syrian student, faced with the task of authoring an unwritten future, changed the way the class approached history. This U.S. student, in turn, was jolted out of the comfort of hindsight and invited to reconsider the past and the received wisdom of liberal American circles, with a fresh perspective. Exposure to new and challenging perspectives is an essential part of education, and this project succeeded in offering that to students on both sides of the Atlantic.

In a reflection written at the end of the class, Brill-Carlat wrote that the one-on-one conversations with his partner, Ali, provided many of the

most productive and enjoyable moments of the class. “Deviating slightly from the content of the assigned readings,” he remarked, “led to unexpected and really fruitful conversations about, for example, the role that sports can play in healing or aggravating divisions between (and within) towns and even nations.” At its most successful, the structure of the class allowed both groups of students to learn the course material together—and also to strike out on their own and learn from one another individually.

### LESSONS LEARNED

The Vassar students agreed that the one-on-one conversations were highlights of the course, and that hectic schedules—especially the demands on the Berliners’ time from school, legal proceedings, and other obligations—made it difficult to connect regularly. In a future iteration of the class, we agreed that a series of shared assignments might bring the two groups even closer together: perhaps a video, zine, or website could become a culminating project. Having taught digitally for over a year, we now know that a blend of synchronous and asynchronous activities and assignments might help relieve the scheduling burden on both groups of students and reduce screen fatigue. Our 2018 struggles with Zoom, which we thought at the time was an outlandish software that would never catch on, made us more nimble in 2020.

Our class prefigured 2020 in another way as well: Vassar purchased laptops and Internet subscriptions for low-income students when the pandemic first hit, just as we had to fundraise for iPads to be able to learn with and from the Berlin-based students. Then, as now, successful virtual learning requires firm commitments and investments from colleges to ensure equitable access. It also requires a less rigid sense of what is doable and what is not. As colleges and universities tout new community-engaged and social-justice-oriented curricula, institutions need to be more flexible with teaching times, open up policies on course credit (or certificates), and provide institutional incentives for taking on the hard work of developing new teaching models to fit current world circumstances and to respond to student calls to be more engaged global citizens. With this in mind, our goal is to allow students like the Berliners to earn course credit and/or certificates for taking classes with Vassar students.

## CONCLUSION

Today, as Americans and people all over the world contend with the corporatization of the university, programs such as the one discussed here can return faculty and students to the core principles of the academy: namely, to foster a free exchange of ideas, and also to be a place of refuge.<sup>6</sup> Though we did not know it at the time, the Spring 2018 pilot course illustrated a model that preserves the emphasis on bilateral learning from in-person exchanges while adapting to politics and pandemic alike. Now that students and professors alike are gaining proficiency in online pedagogy, and now that colleges rethink their former, often restrictive, policies on digital learning, we offer our reflections on this course as a possible template for these new circumstances. Lest our institutions reflexively snap back to the old ways without considering what we can learn from the past two-plus years, we contend that the model we have described is one that colleges would do well to preserve even as Covid-19-related travel restrictions have largely ended, as it allows professors to bring their students together with students in other cities and around the world for shared learning.

In the past few years, we have learned that a whole day of classes on Zoom can be dispiriting, but we also learned to be more gutsy and experimental. Even as the world returns to in-person teaching, we urge institutions to consider running the occasional class using the model we offer here, and to recognize and reward instructors for this kind of pedagogical creativity. Carefully planned digital courses are one way for colleges to stick to an essential value of a liberal arts education—mutually beneficial exchange of ideas—and to remain nimble in an age that demands constant innovation and rethinking of institutional assumptions.

We must take care not to reflexively go back to the old ways without considering how our institutions might have been needlessly exclusionary. The old ways went out the window long ago, along with in-person concerts, conferences, and department meetings. Out of necessity, our institutions have already done the unthinkable—the impossible, the *verboten*—by erecting tent classrooms, shunting classes online, rejiggering the academic calendar on the fly, and more. The period of forced experimentation in 2020–2021, and our experience working with the Berlin students, prompts us to keep brainstorming: why not bring that same sort of innovation to

<sup>6</sup>Nancy Bisaha, “The Medieval University as Refuge,” *EuropeNow* 30 (October 2019), <https://www.europenowjournal.org/2019/10/28/the-medieval-university-as-refuge/>.



consider how to brave the morass of time zones and expand our offerings to displaced students abroad? Why not employ scholars trapped in camps or displaced somewhere across the globe to teach digitally until they can return home or receive asylum? We have a tremendous opportunity now to hold each entrenched practice in our institutions up to the light to see if it still has a place in our rebuilt and more equity-minded ways of conducting teaching and research.

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# Small Things

*Nathalie Peutz*

“How is Hassan?” a young Yemeni woman I’ll call Heba asked me coyly, interrupting a conversation about the hardships she and other Yemeni refugees had experienced since the pandemic outbreak.<sup>1</sup> It was December 2021, during my first visit to the refugee camp in nearly two years. I was eager to learn about the impact of the coronavirus on my interlocutors’ daily lives, their economic well-being, and their migratory plans. As in many communities the world over, some believed Covid-19 was a conspiracy, a distant threat, or a “Christian”/[alien] disease. Others described how “everyone” in the camp and at home in Yemen had suffered its symptoms. But amid our discussions of these and other grave developments, several Yemeni refugees I had come to know asked me explicitly about the

<sup>1</sup>All names used in this chapter are pseudonyms, with the exception of the named photographers Nadia Benchallal and Khaled al-Maqtari. I am profoundly grateful to the NYUAD Office of Global Education for enabling the course travel I describe below; to the Akkasah Center for Photography at NYUAD for their support; to Carol Brandt, Wayne Young, and Nadia Benchallal for accompanying me on preparatory and class trips; to the NYUAD students for their sincere engagement with the refugees in Markazi; and, most of all, to our hosts for their unparalleled generosity.

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NYU Abu Dhabi undergraduate students I had brought to the camp four years earlier. *And how is Marwan? And the one from El Salvador? And the one who played sports with the kids?* Heba and her friend Najma continued, trying to remember various students' names, reminiscing about the ones they had found especially attractive, sweet, or dynamic.

"Do you think it was beneficial that I brought the students to the camp? Or was it pointless?" I asked Heba. Even before and during these immersive course trips, I had worried about the ethics and implications of bringing privileged undergraduates to a refugee camp in Djibouti. Would our visit cause undue harm, or be considered voyeuristic? Would the benefits to my students far outweigh any potential benefits to refugees in the camp? Now, with the pandemic having disrupted all forms of global travel, the extraordinary mobility that had formerly been afforded to me and my students seemed almost grotesque.

"On the contrary," Heba insisted, "they lit up the camp!"

Heba and Najma proceeded to tell me how they continue to think and talk about individual students, how much they had enjoyed the students' visits, and how few visitors they have received in the time of Covid-19. Not even humanitarian organizations visit the camp now, they said, except for a few Korean Christian missionaries who have come once or twice.

"It's as if the world forgot about us," Najma said.

It was with such global forgetting—or inattention—in mind that I had designed a course titled, "The Other Crisis: Displacement and Migration across the Red Sea." Conceived as a critique of the English-language media's focus on the "European migrant crisis" of 2015/2016, "the *other* crisis" aimed to draw my students' attention to migration to and from the Arabian Peninsula, where NYU Abu Dhabi is located. This was not simply a matter of "local" concern. Notably, in both 2018 and 2019, when I taught the course, the number of migrants and asylum seekers crossing the Red Sea to Yemen exceeded the number of migrants and asylum seekers crossing the Mediterranean Sea to Europe.<sup>2</sup> The majority of these migrants

<sup>2</sup>In 2018, approximately 160,000 migrants crossed the Red Sea to Yemen, exceeding the 146,656 migrants who entered Europe by sea (115,399) and land (31,257) the same year. In 2019, more than 138,000 migrants crossed the Red Sea, exceeding the 128,472 migrants who entered Europe by sea (103,836) and land (24,636). See <https://reliefweb.int/report/yemen/flow-monitoring-points-2018-migrant-arrivals-and-yemeni-returns-saudi-arabia--january>; <https://reliefweb.int/report/yemen/flow-monitoring-points-migrant-arrivals--and-yemeni-returns-saudi-arabia-2019>; <https://migration.iom.int/europe/arrivals?type=arrivals> (last accessed January 20, 2022).

were Ethiopians and Somalis smuggled into and through Yemen en route to Saudi Arabia in search of work. At the same time, thousands of Yemenis and African refugees in Yemen were fleeing the war-torn country to seek refuge in, or transit through, the Horn of Africa. The most vulnerable of these Yemenis ended up in the Markazi refugee camp in Obock, northern Djibouti—within kilometers of the port and landings from where the Ethiopian migrants embark on their sea crossings to Yemen.<sup>3</sup>

Having conducted preliminary ethnographic research with Somali refugees in Yemen in the early 2000s, I became alarmed by the news of Yemenis seeking refuge in the Horn of Africa following the outbreak of the Yemen war in 2015. A year later, I began visiting Markazi regularly to interview the refugees from Yemen. At the outset, and with the support of the Akkasah Center for Photography at NYU Abu Dhabi (NYUAD), I collaborated with the photographer Nadia Benchallal to document the Yemeni refugees' experience visually as well as ethnographically.<sup>4</sup> During our first visits, Nadia walked from tent to tent, organizing and taking family portraits while I conducted interviews. Often, we worked side by side, Nadia gathering the household together for a portrait before or after I asked its members about their life histories and migratory pathways. Together, we explained the academic nature and intent of the project; we also explained, repeatedly, that neither of us had ties to any government or resettlement program, and that our project would not help them directly. Many refugees we spoke to expressed their own frustration at the lack of sustained global media attention to Yemen, agreeing with journalists and human rights organizations who characterized the war and humanitarian crisis in Yemen as “the world’s forgotten war.” Therefore, our project to document the camp was comprehended and even welcomed by most of the people we encountered. It may have helped that we strove to give each

<sup>3</sup> Run by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and Djibouti’s government refugee agency, the refugee camp is situated directly across the street from a Migrant Reception Center run by the International Organization for Migration (IOM), which assists Ethiopian and other migrants returning to their country. The camp’s very location underscores the commonalities and distinctions between refugees and migrants in the region; here, young Ethiopian migrants—many of them minors—enter the camp frequently to beg the refugees for food.

<sup>4</sup> A selection of Nadia Benchallal’s photographs is available on the Akkasah Center for Photography’s website: <https://akkasah.org/en/results/?filter=location%3EDjibouti;&quries=&pageid=undefined>. See also Nathalie Peutz, “Markazi: A Camp at a Crossroads.” *EuropeNow*. Council for European Studies (CES), Issue 25 (2019), [https://www.europe-nowjournal.org/2019/03/04/markazi/#\\_ftnref7](https://www.europe-nowjournal.org/2019/03/04/markazi/#_ftnref7).

household a large, laminated print of their portrait during our subsequent visits to the camp, failing to do so only in cases when the families had moved elsewhere. Some of these prints are still displayed in their homes today.

It also helped that we soon extended the collaborative scope of the project by inviting nine individuals to document their day-to-day camp life and experiences over the course of a year.<sup>5</sup> Aiming for a representative group, we gave compact cameras to at least one woman and one man from each of the camp's four residential sections, and to individuals from various geographical areas and socioeconomic backgrounds. Initially, our desire for diversity and inclusion created misunderstandings, for many other refugees requested cameras and challenged the basis of our selection. For example, several section leaders and even the Djiboutian guards questioned why we had given cameras to a supposedly delinquent young man and other overtly marginalized individuals, instead of to them. In order to protect the photographers as much as the project, we warned our collaborators that this should not be an exposé of camp corruption, but a narrative of their daily lives. In January, March, and October 2017, Nadia held workshops in which she gave the group basic training in photography while also meeting individually with participants to encourage them to develop a particular focus: a visual voice. Thus, as the project advanced, it became clear to the participants and the rest of the refugees that the cameras were not simply a gift, but also a responsibility. This very visible collaboration—manifest in the first exhibit of participants' work in the camp, open to all the refugees, before a public exhibition—underscored our documentary and educational objectives (Fig. 1).

In this context, after the initial year of ethnographic fieldwork and photographic collaboration, it seemed feasible to bring undergraduate students to the camp. I am privileged to work at a university that offers its students a three-week January term dedicated to intensive, immersive, and experiential courses, many with a "regional seminar" component. I wanted to teach a course on forced migration and proposed that a ten-day visit to Djibouti (with seven full days in the camp) would allow us to explore the roots and development of this particular "crisis," the centuries-long

<sup>5</sup> See Rebecca Buxton, "How Yemeni Refugees Photographed their World," *News Deeply* (*Refugees Deeply: Picturing Refugees*), May 31 (2018), <https://deeply.thenewhumanitarian.org/refugees/community/2018/05/31/how-yemeni-refugees-photographed-their-world>.



**Fig. 1** Nadia Benchallal running a workshop on photography with the project participants. Obock, Djibouti. (Source: Nathalie Peutz, 2017)

interconnections between communities straddling the Red Sea, and the politics and ethics of humanitarian interventions and visual documentation. When the course was approved, I was as nervous as I was excited. I had never before had the opportunity to integrate my teaching and research to this extent. It seemed clear that the students would benefit. Less certain was how these young students' engagements and behaviors would affect the refugees, or even my own ongoing fieldwork.

The course was scheduled to meet three hours a day, with each day's coursework being the equivalent of a week's learning during a regular

semester. During the first three days on campus in Abu Dhabi (four days in 2019), we prepared for the trip by reading and discussing historical and ethnographic literature on refugees and displacement in the twentieth-century Middle East, on historical connections between Yemen and the Horn of Africa, on the contemporary situation in Yemen, and on Djibouti as a migratory crossroads. A Public Information Officer for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) Yemen met with our class virtually to give students an official overview of the humanitarian situation in Yemen. After these three or four days (“weeks”) of preparatory coursework, we flew to Djibouti city, where we met the director of Djibouti’s Office National d’Assistance aux Réfugiés et Sinistrés (ONARS) and received a short lecture about the establishment of this government refugee agency dating back to the country’s independence in 1977. This was followed by a historical walking tour of the city by a geography professor Dr. Moustapha Nour Ayeh from the University of Djibouti. The next day, we visited Ali Addeh, one of Djibouti’s oldest refugee camps, where the students were met by Somali, Ethiopian, and Eritrean refugees who each spoke about the conflicts in their respective countries.<sup>6</sup>

Thus, on the sixth day (“week”) of the semester, we traveled north to Obock, where we stayed in a basic lodge and spent the following week visiting the Markazi camp every morning and afternoon. There, during a “typical” day, students learned about camp life in the mornings: meeting with UNHCR and ONARS officers, shadowing the refugee employees of humanitarian organizations, and assisting with food distribution, among other tasks. Each noon, we returned to our hotel for lunch, followed by a classroom-style academic seminar in which we discussed the assigned readings in light of our observations in the camp. Then, during the afternoon camp visits, the students offered their own lessons and activities, in return: teaching English and French, playing sports with teens and young children, teaching guitar scales, and engaging in crafts. These days ended with dinner at the hotel and a study period for reading and journaling—at least, in theory (Fig. 2).

What really happened, both in 2018 and in 2019, is that the Yemeni refugees I had come to know insisted on inviting the students to their homes for lunches, dinners, and tea. They also organized and invited the students to various social events (some in 2018, some in 2019): a welcome party upon their arrival, a birthday party for one of their daughters, a

<sup>6</sup>In 2019, this visit to the Ali Addeh camp occurred at the end of our stay.





**Fig. 2** An NYUAD student from Egypt teaches English to young students. Obock, Djibouti. (Source: Nadia Benchallal, 2018)

henna party for the women, a beach day for the men, an outing to a nearby riverbed, and a dance party the night before our departure.

In other words, the refugees converted what I had planned as a fairly sober course (with far too much reading) into intimate, social encounters: ones in which the refugees were not the subjects of our lessons, but our teachers and hosts. Indeed, many of the refugees the students met embraced either or both of these roles. For example, a former activist in Yemen educated the students on the specific rights afforded to refugees by the 1951 Refugee Convention, while an elderly shopkeeper was keen to share his life story as a way of instructing young students how abruptly one's life circumstances can change. Meanwhile, the women turned their monthly rice, oil, and sugar rations into veritable Yemeni feasts. (I insisted on paying our hosts for these meals, despite their repeated refusals.) If these class visits were productive, it was precisely because our hosts took charge of many, if not most, of our activities in the camp, transforming my students from would-be "voluntourists"—ostensibly "helping" the refugees—into teachable "guests" (Fig. 3).



**Fig. 3** Hospitality in the camp. Obock, Djibouti. (Source: Nathalie Peutz, 2019)

Three and four years later, it was the Yemenis' hospitality, graciousness, and dignity that seem to have stayed with my students the most. Shortly after my recent conversations with Heba and Najma—and having received an impromptu email from a former student describing her J-term course four years earlier as “one of the most unforgettable experiences of my life”—I reached out to the rest of my J-term 2018 and 2019 students, asking them to reflect on their Markazi visit. Of the fourteen students who responded (out of twenty-nine students in my two courses<sup>7</sup>), twelve recalled how generous and welcoming our hosts had been. Several mentioned specific incidents and individuals—for example, “I remember very clearly the face of the man with his own museum, the man who invited us to his house for tea and a welcome speech, the man with the guitar, the woman who did my beautiful henna, the birthday girl, the girl who built

<sup>7</sup>I wrote to my former students using their NYU Abu Dhabi email addresses and cannot be sure that I reached everyone.

pebble houses with me on the dusty ground of the camp, the girl who raced me and hurt her toe, the boy who shared a chocolate cookie with me”—and cited the connections they made and maintained for some time via social media. At least one of the students remains in regular contact with two of the refugees they met four years ago (Fig. 4).

Many students noted how this course had altered their preconceived notions of refugees and their views on migration: “I think what has stayed with me the most is how complicated everything relating to refugees and forced migration is”; “what has stuck with me is not only the unfairness [of their situation], but just how easy it is for all of us to ignore suffering;” “I became especially sensitized to the narratives of a ‘deserving’ refugee, when people would justify why letting somebody in is okay while others is not, using meritocratic reasoning;” “I had studied migration a lot in high school but my understanding was dry and theoretical. Now I see migration as a basic right;” “I am now for open borders and global free movement of peoples.” Arguably—and as this very essay collection demonstrates—many of these “lessons” could be learned by other means,



**Fig. 4** An NYUAD student from New Zealand being taught Arabic guitar scales. Obock, Djibouti. (Source: Nadia Benchallal, 2018)

without having to bring already-privileged college students to a refugee camp. But what these intimate encounters brought home to my students was the recognition that “refugees”—like themselves—are not a homogenous group. “People differed in their hopes and desires and skills and personalities and stories as much as anyone else, anywhere else. It should not take a visit to a refugee camp for people to understand that there is no difference between refugees and everyone else, and rationally, I knew this before, but the experience in Markazi made the understanding visceral,” wrote one student. “I quickly realized that, like any other group of people, the residents of Markazi were quite internally diverse. People held vastly different values, education levels, degrees of religiosity, and conceptions of what it means to be a refugee. I realized that being a refugee is more of a descriptor of a state of a given individual at a given point in time, and not a defining feature of one’s identity,” wrote another. It was this simple realization—that “Arab and/or Muslim refugees” are not a monolithic group, as one student wrote—that softened my Turkish student’s self-described “biased” views on Syrian migrants in his country and that made my South Korean student “more emotionally involved when defending refugee resettlement in Korea, especially when Yemeni refugees came to Jeju Island in the summer of 2018.”<sup>8</sup>

The exceptionally diverse backgrounds of NYU Abu Dhabi’s students brought additional moments of mutual recognition to the fore. (The twenty-nine students I brought to Markazi in 2018 and 2019 came from the following twenty-five countries: Afghanistan, Bosnia-Herzegovina, China, Egypt, El Salvador, Finland, Hungary, India, Jordan, Lebanon, Malaysia, Morocco, Nepal, New Zealand, Pakistan, Philippines, Poland, Slovakia, South Korea, Thailand, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, the United Kingdom, the United States of America, and Yemen.) Although a man who invited each cohort of students to his outdoor “sitting room” joked about hosting “the United Nations,” it was not just a matter of national diversity on display. One Yemeni man with roots in India took pleasure in speaking Hindi to my student from India. A Yemeni man from Aden was delighted to meet a young woman from Sarajevo, where he had studied architecture several decades ago. He spent the week practicing his Bosnian with her, nostalgically reliving his student days (Fig. 5).

<sup>8</sup>In April and May 2018, more than 500 Yemenis fled to South Korea’s Jeju Island and claimed asylum, triggering a minor “refugee crisis.” For an analysis of the Christian Right’s contribution to the anti-asylum sentiment, see Angie Heo, “The Christian Right and Refugee Rights: The Border Politics of Anti-communism and Anti-discrimination in South Korea,” *Religion and Society: Advances in Research* 12 (2021): 86–101.



**Fig. 5** A Yemeni refugee from Aden and an NYUAD student from Bosnia connect through shared languages. Obock, Djibouti. (Source: Nadia Benchallal, 2018)

Some students were able to see themselves in the refugees, much as some refugees were able to see themselves in the students. For students with migration backgrounds, the connections were even more immediate and profound. Zara, a Somali woman from Finland, was confronted with her own experience as a child of refugees:

Despite the fact that my parents were refugees, I was incredibly ignorant of the spectrum of experiences that refugees can face outside the context of my family and immediate community. Going to Markazi was a much-needed awakening for me. Taking this class helped me to understand that a lot of migration policies thinly veil the host country's xenophobia and/or are really exploitative and add to the disenfranchisement of migrants.... For almost a year after leaving Djibouti, I could not speak to anyone about the people I met there and the things I learned without crying. I was incredibly emotionally worn out by the end of the J-term class. I wish I had written more honestly [in my journals] about my internal struggle to negotiate my positionality as a Somali born to two refugee parents, coming to the camp from one of its major donor nations and conversing daily with people who look like me and have similar backgrounds, but starkly different positions.



Dina, a Yemeni woman who had grown up in the United Arab Emirates, wrote that the visit “forced me to face my own suppressed traumas, which I had actively avoided until then”:

Before going to Markazi and taking this course, I had very little knowledge about the political history of Yemen, despite being Yemeni myself. Growing up, the politics of Yemen were never openly discussed for fear of persecution. To me, Yemen and the Horn of Africa was a region where my father and his forefathers once lived. Many of my family members frequently told stories of their plight and journey back to Yemen from Somalia after the civil war broke out in the 1980s, but I had never paid their tales much attention, for that’s all they were to me: tales that were closer to fiction than they were to my reality of growing up in the UAE [United Arab Emirates]. In my efforts to integrate and belong into Emirati society, I had unconsciously set up a social distance to protect myself from associating myself with the term “refugee.” This distance which had shielded me for years was abruptly removed; I couldn’t escape myself in Markazi.

“Looking back on this now,” Dina continued, “I realize that [my visit to] Markazi was a turning point in my life that continues to shape my educational and professional trajectory.” The following year, Dina interned with an American Jewish NGO providing pro bono legal assistance to refugees in Lesbos, Greece. “Often, I found myself to be the only Arab volunteer in a space that was dominated by Western humanitarian workers and activists,” Dina wrote. “As I conducted preliminary screening interviews and prepared Arab, Afghan, and Somali refugees to undertake the eligibility interviews, my unmistakable Arab Muslim identity became a source of comfort to many.” Dina enrolled in courses on human rights law and international refugee law, eventually receiving her master’s degree in international relations. In addition to influencing her own career choices, the time she spent in the Markazi camp altered her self-perception. “Prior to Markazi, I was secretly ashamed of being Yemeni and believed it to be a misfortune of sorts. To be a Yemeni in the UAE (and the Gulf, even) was to be a second-class human being who is constantly viewed as ‘less than,’” Dina wrote.<sup>9</sup> “Now, I believe it to be my greatest asset as it has uniquely situated me as a multicultural mediator in every context.”

<sup>9</sup>“Throughout the ’90s and 2000s, Yemen was considered to be the poorest and least developed [country] in the region: a “weak link” that tarnishes the prosperous image of its neighbors. Today, we are perceived to be a persistent security threat to the region’s peace and stability,” Dina explained later, upon reading a draft of this essay.

On our last full day in Djibouti in January 2018, we drove from Obock to Djibouti City, stopping for a quick dip in saline Lake Assal on our way south. Five of the photography project participants and some of their family members came with us, having received special permission to leave the camp. Together, we attended the opening night of an exhibit at the French Institute in Djibouti, featuring photographs taken by the refugees in Markazi. The French ambassador to Djibouti, various Djiboutian officials, and other dignitaries who attended the event mingled with the refugee-photographers, asking them about their work. On this evening, the students were peripheral, while the refugees were the honored guests. (A year later, a subset of these photographs was exhibited at Vassar College and Bennington College in partnership with the Consortium on Forced Migration, Displacement, and Education. In 2020, three photographs taken by Khaled al-Maqtari, one of the project participants, were published in the multi-genre anthology, *Voices on the Move: An Anthology by and about Refugees*, edited by Domnica Radulescu and Roxana Cazan.)

Although the benefits of this and other kinds of experiential coursework to undergraduates are evident, it remains an open question—for me, and for the students—whether the refugees in Markazi “benefited” at all from these exchanges. Four years later, most of the refugees the students met are still stuck in the camp, feeling as hopeless and forgotten as ever. Many of my former students are aware of their extraordinary privilege, then and now. They still grapple, they say, with the “always already unequal relationship” between themselves and the camp refugees and with the fact that it was their “Bildung” that was front and center. “I became a better person, more humane, even more radical,” writes a student from Lebanon. “But what did they get in practice? I’m sure meeting was an enriching experience for them in various ways, but what I’m saying is this: I am a more sophisticated person and thinker thanks to this experience—i.e., there’s material gain for me (and us as students, researchers, etc.). But, for them, it’s hard to see how our visit changed anything.”

When I put the same question to the Yemeni man who had studied in Sarajevo, he specifically recalled the students from Bosnia, Poland, and Hungary. “I think the benefit was for them,” he said in English. “They got benefits from us, from our situation, but for us, we didn’t benefit.” But then he remembered the American who played football with the children: “When I saw that young American guy, I felt happy because he reminded me of that time of my youth, yes. That helped me. Nothing else.”

I then turned to ask the question of Heba’s sister, Munira, who had joined us. “Was there any benefit to you from this visit?” I asked.

“When they came here to visit, you mean?” Munira said. “We appreciate these actions. You understand? When someone visits the refugees... They would play football with the kids. They showed them things they didn’t know before.”

“Small things,” I suggested.

“For us, these were not small things,” Munira said. “[They were] big things! Small things, and big.”

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