

## AMST 585 Topics in Cultural Theory: Critical Refugee Studies

Professor Viet Thanh Nguyen

Mondays, 2-4:50PM, THH 219

Office hours: Monday after seminar, in person; Tuesday 2-3PM online via [Zoom](#); and by appointment

“Critical refugee studies” is a relatively new field, even if refugee studies is not. In this seminar, we look at some of the history and politics behind the refugee “crisis” of the contemporary era and focus on two strains of thinking that emerge from it: first, the efforts by scholars doing critical refugee studies to treat refugee movements, histories, and populations as indexes for systemic global crises of war, capitalism, colonialism, and climate change; and second, the efforts of refugees and their descendants to represent themselves through literature, art, film, and music, using the power of cultural production to assert refugee subjectivities and contest the objectifying, often dehumanizing frameworks of refugee aid, scholarship, and legislation. Ultimately, the seminar’s goal is to think through a “refugee methodology” that leads towards a critique of state power and a liberatory aesthetics.

This is a readings course, so there is no writing, unless you really want to write a final project, in which case you can discuss with me. Otherwise, the requirements are to read all material for each seminar meeting, to be verbally and critically participatory, and to present once. The presentation will involve the presenter being in charge of the seminar for the first half (in some cases, the second half). You are the professor, and the task will involve you figuring out your pedagogical and critical approach to the material and to the class. Summary of material should be very minimal. Focus on critique—the critique that is explicit or latent in the material; your critique of the critique; and your sense of the material’s larger significance, or lack thereof, to a critical refugee studies project as you see it. You can be as creative or not, discussion oriented or not, as you see fit for your own pedagogical style.

If we need to meet online for seminar, this is the Zoom [link](#).

Meeting ID

936 8772 3214

Passcode zQ78DzO2go

Office hours

Meeting ID: 913 5238 0490

Passcode: 197356

### Books

- Behrouz Boochani, *No Friend but the Mountains*
- Critical Refugee Studies Collective, *Departures: An Introduction to Critical Refugee Studies* (available as PDF—do not circulate or share)
- Eryn Lê Espiritu Gandhi, *Archipelago of Resettlement: Vietnamese Refugee Settlers and Decolonization across Guam and Israel-Palestine* (available as PDF and also as a free e-document [here](#))
- Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*

- Shahram Khosravi, *“Illegal” Traveller: An Auto-Ethnography of Borders*
- Peter Nyers, *Rethinking Refugees: Beyond States of Emergency*
- Anthony Veasna So, *Afterparties: Stories*
- Edward Said, *After the Last Sky: Palestinian Lives*
- Lyndsey Stonebridge, *Placeless People: Writing, Rights, and Refugees*
- Eric Tang, *Unsettled: Cambodian Refugees in the NYC Hyperghetto*
- Y-Dang Troeung, *Refugee Lifeworlds: The Afterlife of the Cold War in Cambodia*
- Ma Vang, *History on the Run: Secrecy, Fugitivity, and Hmong Refugee Epistemologies*
- Mai Der Vang, *Yellow Rain*

## Films

- Ellen Kuras and Thavisouk Phrasavath, *The Betrayal* (96 minutes)
- Jonas Poher Rasmussen, *Flee* (90 minutes)
- David Henry Gerson, *The Story Won’t Die* (83 minutes)

All articles and documents below are available as PDFs in this Dropbox [folder](#).

Syllabus subject to change—some texts might be added or deleted as needed.

Week 1 August 22

Introduction

Week 2 August 29

Critical Refugee Studies

- Critical Refugee Studies Collective, *Departures: An Introduction to Critical Refugee Studies* (PDF—do not share or distribute, has some editing marks)
- “1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees” and “1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees,” selections: p. 1-32 and 46-47, 51-52, skim the rest
- “1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights,” UN General Assembly
- Andrew Shacknove, “Who is a Refugee?”
- David Martin, “The Refugee Concept: On Definitions, Politics, and the Careful Use of a Scarce Resource”

Supplement if you need it:

“The Refugee Project” <http://www.therefugeeproject.org/#>

Week 3 September 5

Labor Day, no class; read for next week (two books)

Week 4 September 12

War, Genocide, and Refugee Memories

- Anthony Veasna So, *Afterparties: Stories*
- Y-Dang Troeung, *Refugee Lifeworlds: The Afterlife of the Cold War in Cambodia*
- Khatharya Um, excerpt from *From the Land of Shadows: War, Revolution and the Making of the Cambodian Diaspora*
- Yén Lê Espiritu, “Critical Refuge(e) Studies” and “Militarized Refuge(es),” in *Body Counts: The Vietnam War and Militarized Refuge(es)*

Week 5 September 19

Refugee Subjectivity and Agency

- Peter Nyers, *Rethinking Refugees: Beyond States of Emergency*
- Hannah Arendt, “We Refugees”
- Giorgio Agamben, “We Refugees”
- Vinh Nguyen, “Refugeetude: When Does a Refugee Stop Being a Refugee?,” *Social Text* 37, no. 2 (June 2019): 109-131

Week 6 September 26

Professor absent; classroom film screening in place of seminar  
Ellen Kuras and Thavisouk Phrasavath, *The Betrayal* (96 minutes)

Week 7 October 3

class online  
(Re)settlement and Contradiction

- Eric Tang, *Unsettled: Cambodian Refugees in the NYC Hyperghetto*
- Discussion of *The Betrayal*

Watch online at home for next week: Jonas Poher Rasmussen, director, [Flee](#) on Amazon.com or [Apple TV](#) or other [services](#)

Week 8 October 10

Narrating (Forced) Migration

- discussion of *Flee* and *No Friend but the Mountains*, Behrouz Boochani
- Giorgio Agamben, Selections from *Homo Sacer*

Watch online at home for next week: David Henry Gerson, director, [The Story Won't Die](#) on Amazon.com or [Apple TV](#) (86 minutes)

Week 9 October 17

Migration, Art, and Music with guest Josh Kun

- Stokes, Martin. 2020. "Migration and Music." *Music Research Annual* 1: 1–24.
- Josh Kun, [Allá in the Mix](#): Mexican *Sonideros* and the Musical Politics of Migrancy
- [A Serenade for the Undocumented | Pop-Up Magazine](#)
- Discussion of *The Story Won't Die*

Week 10 October 24

Fugitivity and the Legacies of War

- Ma Vang, *History on the Run: Secrecy, Fugitivity, and Hmong Refugee Epistemologies*
- Mai Der Vang, *Yellow Rain*

Week 11 October 31

Humanitarian Borders with guest Fiori Berhane

- Miriam Ticktin, "Thinking Beyond Humanitarian Borders"
- Shahram Khosravi, *"Illegal" Traveller: An Auto-Ethnography of Borders*
- Fiori Berhane "Paradoxes of Humanitarian Recognition: Race, Predation and Non-Statist Solidarities in the Migration of Eritreans to Europe" (do not circulate or cite without Fiori's permission)

Week 12 November 7

Climate Change, Climate Refugees, and Open Borders

- Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*
- Teresa Hayter, "No Borders: The Case Against Immigration Controls"
- Joseph Carens, "Aliens and Citizens: The Case for Open Borders"
- Jane McAdams, "Conceptualizing Climate-Related Movement"
- Dipesh Chakrabarty, "The Climate of History"

Week 13 November 14

Writing Exile

- Lyndsey Stonebridge, *Placeless People: Writing, Rights, and Refugees*
- Edward Said, "Reflections on Exile"
- Hannah Arendt, "The Decline of the Nation-State and the End of the Rights of Man," in *The Origins of Totalitarianism (1951)* (New York, Harcourt Inc: 1976), 267-302.

Week 14 November 21

Palestine, Exile, and Memory

- Edward Said, *After the Last Sky: Palestinian Lives*
- Lila Sharif, “Vanishing Palestine,” *Critical Ethnic Studies* 2, no. 1 (Spring 2016): 17-39

Week 15 November 28

Creative and Critical Solidarities with guests Eryn Lê Espiritu Gandhi and Lan Duong

- Eryn Le Espiritu Gandhi, *Archipelago of Resettlement: Vietnamese Refugee Settlers and Decolonization across Guam and Israel-Palestine*
- Yên Lê Espiritu and Lan Duong, “Feminist Refugee Epistemology: Reading Displacement in Vietnamese and Syrian Refugee Art”
- Duong, Lan and Lila Sharif, “Displaced Subjects: Revolution, Film, and Women in Việt Nam and Palestine”