Emma Lazarus called America the “mother of exiles” in her poem, “The New Colossus,” which graces the Statue of Liberty. This lecture examines the enduring idea of America as a land of hope and refuge for the persecuted and oppressed. It goes beyond the familiar narratives of the Puritan settlers and the Statue of Liberty to think about how the idea of asylum has historically justified and obscured nation-building and racial agendas. It will compare the politics surrounding cold war refugees from Europe, China, Cuba and Vietnam, and consider the contemporary recasting of Central American asylum seekers as undocumented migrants.

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