

Carolyn Halladay reflects on the impact of Jaime Lier Chen's CHDS thesis, "Muted Voices: Toward an Understanding of the U.S. Asylum Program at the Southwest Border."

By Carolyn Halladay

Jaime Lier Chen crafted her thesis amid a great deal of shouting. The 2020 presidential election campaign was at full volume. Stentorian outrage attended all sides of all issues at the U.S. southern border, the broad subject of Jaime's work. Crowds of people raised their voices, whether in demonstrations in response to incidents of police using lethal force against citizens of color or in protests against Coronavirus-related restrictions. Yet, even (or especially?) in this noisy age, Jaime took up the cause of "muted voices," as she deemed them—and capturing the nuances of the human aspects of migration from Central America, particularly the fraught question of asylum.

With careful attention to the details of context and experience, Jaime's thesis gives voice to three fictional narratives—and gives life to three characters: a juvenile refugee from Honduras, a Border Patrol agent, and an immigration officer. They are not archetypes or stereotypes; rather they are complex personalities in challenging circumstances. They are realistic in this regard; I still wish we could recruit Immigration Officer Carla Dominguez to the CHDS master's program. And they ring true in another way: no one has the One Right Answer, not least because the matter defies simplistic solutions.

The value of this approach—and this thesis—to other scholars and practitioners of homeland security begins, at least, with its humanity. After all, the "situation on the border" is real life for any number of men, women, and children in uniform, in "caravans," in extremis. I came away from each draft of this work restored and resolved in my compassion. Put another way: novelist Mohsin Hamid is credited with the insight that "[e]mpathy is about finding echoes of another person in yourself." Jaime Chen's thesis helps us hear these echoes—not loud but very clearly.

About the Author

Carolyn Halladay is a historian of contemporary Central Europe, particularly of the totalitarian 20th century. She is also a lawyer. She has published on civil-military relations in the United States and Europe, as well as on cultural and political topics, particularly in Germany. In addition to serving as the academic associate for the CHDS master's program, she teaches in the European regional curriculum and the homeland security program in the National Security Affairs department at NPS.

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