Project Title
The Trenton-Salcajá Project
URB202/HUM202/VIS200 Documentary Film and the City

Overview
URB 202, Documentary Film and the City, now starting its fifth year, proposes to turn its lens on the fastest-growing population in Trenton: Central American migrants. WWS lecturer and filmmaker Purcell Carson will use her ongoing documentary film course to explore narratives of migration, transnational identity and the structures of remittance in Trenton’s Guatemalan population and one city of origin, Salcajá. Carson and students—in class and in international trips—will examine the cultural, economic and political impact of migration through the eyes of Trenton residents and their families and colleagues in Guatemala. The result will be a suite of short films and the research behind them, as well as the public screenings, social media and community engagement that are hallmarks of the class. This grant would fund initial research and a site visit to establish scholarly connections, gain access to film subjects, interview local journalistic and filmmaking assistants, and gather first footage.

Project Description
Trenton, New Jersey, like hundreds of cities in the U.S., is every year becoming more closely tied to the rest of the Americas. While this troubled city has been losing residents for decades, its Latino population is booming. Almost a third of Trenton residents are recent immigrants from Latin America. The impact of their arrival over the last several decades is felt not only here in New Jersey, but in urban areas throughout Central and South America. The fabric of Trenton today is being reweoven to include a web of connections across our hemisphere. URB202 and The Trenton Project will be documenting these ties in a series of short films that together create a kaleidoscopic portrait of this transnational community.

This exploration is set against the backdrop of today’s bitter immigration debate which often unfolds in broad terms of “refugees,” “illegals,” and “the undocumented.” The day-to-day lived experience of migration, however, is more specific and complex. Observational documentary film, by its nature, leaves this reductive language behind and allows students to dive into intimate and irreducible detail.

Our city-specific approach exemplifies that methodology. Immigrants arrive in Trenton from all over Latin America, but families follow families, friends seek out friends. Investments, remittances and job opportunities travel well-worn paths. In Trenton, one of those paths leads to (and from) the small city of Salcajá, which has sent many to Trenton—and has for decades. Civic organizations in Trenton identify themselves as Salcajense, and the mayor of Salcajá, Miguel Ovalle (one of this project’s contacts), is working to establish an official sister-city relationship. URB202 will focus on these two sites. We will look at narratives of migration, but also structures of economic and cultural remittances, and the social and political issues that challenge these two deeply entwined populations. We will see how emigrants’ departure and new economic fortunes affect their city of origin. And in Trenton, a city struggling to find new solutions to old problems, we will analyze the strategies and hacks that immigrants develop to adapt to, transform, and potentially rejuvenate a damaged urban environment.

Migrants truly live in two countries—physically, mentally, economically, emotionally—and so will our class. In addition to researching and documenting how migration is reshaping these two soon-to-be sister cities, the class will experience the scholarly discussion and political debate from two sides of the north-south divide. In readings and conversations, we will compare how scholars, political actors, and ordinary citizens on both sides of the border understand and frame their thinking.

I envision that this study will span multiple semesters and audiences. As they have in the past, URB202 students will become part of a cohort that contributes to a larger ongoing project; they will share material and footage, and will return periodically to check in on the progress of their peers. We’ll be based in Princeton/Trenton during the course itself, but travel to Guatemala in one (or multiple) break periods. Furthermore, by working in a
visually compelling and accessible medium, students will be able to share their work not only in scholarly discussion at the university but also as part of a wider public conversation about these issues. By the end, our cohort will include not only students but the community partners and film subjects who become stakeholders in the process.

While these films can be shot in a few days, they require much more time to develop contacts, build relationships, negotiate access and plan logistics. I’ve already started this process in Trenton’s Guatemalan community. A grant from the International Fund will allow me to lay the groundwork for the international side of our work. I propose to pursue my contacts at the Universidad de Valle de Guatemala, whom I hope will offer students important context. I will interview journalistic assistants who will help us all navigate fieldwork and filmmaking. And I will find and build initial relationships with our film subjects, the friends and family of Trentonians. In addition, I propose to work with a videographer to begin the vital process of gathering footage.

Purcell Carson is a documentary filmmaker and a lecturer/professional specialist in the Woodrow Wilson School. She has directed and filmed previously in Central and South America on a project about the global banana industry. As part of her work on migration, she is currently editing a feature documentary about the Syrian refugee crisis, another film in her continuing collaboration with Academy Award winning director, Megan Mylan. For the past four years, Carson’s seminar, “Documentary Film and the City” has used film to explore urban issues in Trenton, NJ. Thanks to our film subjects, public screenings, press coverage, and a website (thetrentonproject.com), the class is—in its small way—contributing to the ongoing conversation about the city.