LIFE

RUTGERS PROFESSOR SPEAKS ON BOOK, HISTORIES OF SLAVERY AND FREEDOM IN LATIN AMERICA

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Dr. Yesenia Barragan delivers the 2026 Fusco Distinguished Lecture titled in the Konover Auditorium on Oct. 19. Barragan said her upcoming book, "In Latin America You Could Be Free" will publish on Nov. 10.

PHOTO BY NORA MARIANO, ASSOCIATE PHOTO EDITOR/THE DAILY CAMPUS

One of the most prominent ideas about slavery in the United States is the image of the North as a land of freedom to which enslaved people dreamed of escaping to. But few know about those who fled southward to Mexico, Central and South America, and the Caribbean in search of a free life.

During her lecture at the Dodd Center for Human Rights, Yesenia Barragan, history professor at Rutgers University, dove deeply into the histories and experiences of slavery and freedom across the Americas.

The lecture was a part of the Fusco Distinguished Lecture Series, which brings scholars from across the country to lecture at the University of Connecticut.

Barragan's lecture was based on her book, "In Latin America You Could Be Free," which will be published by Basic Books on Nov. 10, 2026. The book covers the hopes and ideals of enslaved people searching for liberation, the various efforts at African American migration into Latin America and what Barragan described in her lecture as "the deeply entangled histories of the two regions in the eyes and experiences of thousands of African Americans."

The book depicts the perspectives of African Americans, U.S. officials and Latin American figures, and it uses archival sources to piece together an aspect of the history of slavery that has remained understudied.

Timothy Brown, a doctoral student studying the early antislavery movement in Washington, D.C., said Barragan's research presents a larger picture of global hemispheric freedom.

"I think this book will be really important because it builds upon exploring movements southwards," he said.

Barragan's talk covered many historical points that aren't typically taught in the classroom. For example, she discussed Lincolnia, Abraham Lincoln's proposed settler colony for African Americans, located in Panama, and the passionate debates waged by both African Americans and white Americans about African resettlement — and whether it was something that should be pursued at all. A prominent theme of the lecture was that these debates occurred alongside U.S. imperial expansion and the complicated role that African Americans played as agents and victims of that expansion.

The audience was rapt, and the talk was followed by a lively Q&A session that covered a diverse array of topics from the role of gender in this history to the importance of ports. After the Q&A session, attendees were supplied with food, and conversation filled the space.

A variety of people attended the lecture, including professors and students.

Elizabeth Della Zazzera, a history professor and the associate director of the UConn Humanities Institute, spoke to the potential impacts of Barragan's lecture on students.

"One of the values of a talk like this for an undergraduate is that it helps them see the possibilities of what scholars are doing at the cutting edge of research," she said. "It gives them a playbook for the possibilities of things that they can achieve and the kinds of ways that different people approach different kinds of research questions."



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