When one individual inflicts bodily injury upon another, such injury that death results, we call the deed manslaughter; when the assailant knew in advance that the injury would be fatal, we call his deed murder. But when society places hundreds of proletarians in such a position that they inevitably meet a too early and an unnatural death, one which is quite as much a death by violence as that by the sword or bullet; when it deprives them thousands of the necessities of life, places them under conditions in which they cannot live—forces them, through the strong arm of the law, to remain in such conditions until that death ensues which is the inevitable consequence—knows that these thousands of victims must perish, and yet permits these conditions to remain, its deed is murder just as surely as the deed of a single individual; disguised, malicious murder, murder against which none can defend himself, which does not seem what it is, because no man sees the murderer, because the death of the victim seems a natural one, since the offence is more one of omission than of commission. But murder it remains.

—FRIEDRICH ENGELS, The Condition of the Working Class in England

The differential exposure to death experienced by global migrants is not random or unpredictable. Rather, it represents “the translation into bodies of unequal social relations in which history left its mark” (Fassin 2018, 118). One of our goals in assembling this book is to cut through the disguises that make the disproportionate death and suffering of people who cross borders appear natural. As the chapters herein demonstrate, exclusionary policies and practices deliberately take aim at racialized, dispossessed people in transit in the Americas, becoming the unseen murderers to whom Engels refers. A system of parasitic violence (Patterson [1982] 2018) is responsible not only for increasing exposure to biological death for terrestrial migrants but also for the stripping of people’s personhood, for the
denial of resources, and for countless obstacles that deprive dispossessed migrants of their ability to live, in the fullest sense of that term. What follows is thus part of a broader, transformative effort to draw attention to and implicate destructive policies of legal exclusion, and the broader systems of exploitation and inequality they perpetuate, in order to imagine and build a better world where everyone’s life is fully valued.

Linking exclusionary migration policies to deeper inequalities requires an understanding of the interconnected and systemic nature of oppression. As Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. (1967) put it in his “Beyond Vietnam” speech:

I am convinced that if we are to get on the right side of the world revolution, we as a nation must undergo a radical revolution of values. We must rapidly begin . . . the shift from a thing-oriented society to a person-oriented society. When machines and computers, profit motives and property rights, are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, extreme materialism, and militarism are incapable of being conquered.

These “giant triplets” converged at the Homestead Temporary Shelter for Unaccompanied Children. Located on the Homestead Air Force Base, just south of Miami, Florida, the facility was, for all intents and purposes, a prison that detained Central American children for profit. Comprehensive Health Services, Inc. (CHS), a subsidiary of Caliburn International Corporation, operated the facility intermittently from 2016 to 2019. Homestead was the largest child detention center in the country, and its status as an “emergency influx facility” allowed it to get around regulations and standards established in the Flores Settlement Agreement regarding the well-being and protection of children in government custody (Kumpf 2019). Homestead held more than two thousand teenagers (thirteen- to seventeen-year-olds) at a given time and detained individuals for sixty-seven days, on average. Most of the youth were either traveling without other family when they crossed the border or forcibly removed from their kin and taken into custody by the U.S. government.

The historical operation of racialized citizenship in the United States and the long history of exclusionary policies against nonwhite immigrant communities made the incarceration of children in this camp possible (Paik 2020). As a country, the United States was intentionally forged in a crucible of settler colonialism, involving strategies of genocide, displacement, enclosure, forced labor, and forced assimilation against nonwhite Others (Saito 2020). Racism and its accompanying violence became both alibi and mechanism for the process of colonization in the Americas, and immigration and naturalization policies in the United States unabashedly promoted a white
nation (Paik 2020; Ngai 2004). Even in the wake of the social movements of the mid-twentieth century that struck down formal racial bans in immigration law, social perceptions and political actions related to the migration of Indigenous-descended peoples in the Americas are indelibly haunted by this history (Gordon 1997; Stoler 2006; Volpp 2015). Consider how the forced separation of families by the U.S. Border Patrol replicates other genocidal acts of seizing children from their parents—the separation of Black families under slavery, and the taking of American Indian children from their families to force their attendance at boarding schools from 1869 to the 1960s. While the forced separation of children from their mothers shocked the conscience of U.S. residents enough to spur protests in the summer of 2018, the reality is that such patterns are far more endemic—indeed, children were imprisoned at Homestead before and after that brief moment of reckoning. Such histories demonstrate consistent links between racialization, settler colonial nationalism, and the normalization of violent techniques of political domination.

Profit-seeking has also played a constitutive role in the emergent system of mass incarceration of migrants and asylum seekers in the twenty-first century. In its first twenty-four months, CHS acquired almost half a billion dollars of public money for running the Homestead camp, on top of nearly a million dollars in tax breaks (AFSC 2019a). In its initial public offering filing with the Securities Exchange Commission, CHS made quite clear its strategy of profiting from racist punishment, assuring investors that the Trump administration’s “border enforcement and immigration policy . . . is driving significant growth” (Kennedy 2019). General John Kelly, who served as President Donald Trump’s chief of staff from July 2017 to June 2019, has served on the boards of both Caliburn and its parent investment firm, DC Capital Partners. Kelly, it is also worth noting, led the U.S. Southern Command overseeing military operations in Central and South America from 2012 to 2016. The connections between racism, capitalism, and militarism in this case do not end there: the investors who own CHS also own Sallyport Global—a company that “supports U.S. military and strategic objectives under a for-profit model,” receiving more than $1.75 billion in public funds to operate the scandal-ridden, mercenary-staffed Balad Air Base in Iraq—as well as Global Operations, which specializes “in determining post-war and conflict zone areas to facilitate oil, gas, and mineral extraction” (AFSC 2019a).

What is most pernicious about the Homestead case is that the facility is, quite literally, toxic. Homestead is a Superfund site, and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) thoroughly reported on the existence of toxins at the location as early as 1999 (Environmental Protection Agency 1999). While held captive, youth at Homestead were exposed to more than fifty-
three toxic chemicals—arsenic, lead, and mercury, among many others—toxins that “cause a variety of serious chronic health problems, including kidney failure, hemolytic anemia, and developmental damage” (AFSC 2019b, 5–6). The dangerous chemicals exist as “imperial debris” (Stoler 2013)—the remnants of years of airline combustions and munitions testing. The youth detained at the camp also had to endure the unbearable sound of F-16 fighter jets taking off at decibel levels capable of causing lifelong cognitive impairment (AFSC 2019b). Which is all to say that the facility’s ruling-class owners and enablers profited both politically and financially with full knowledge that they were putting thousands of traumatized youth at potentially fatal risk. To our knowledge, there have not been any deaths at Homestead, but by commodifying human beings to turn a profit, CHS, with generous assistance from the state, is unquestionably stripping migrants of their right to life and enhancing their vulnerability to premature death.

The metaphor of “imperial debris” (Stoler 2013) disrupting and threatening migrant lives is worth emphasizing, as it resonates with the historical reasons Central American children end up on the move across international borders. The youth at Homestead—“almost all from Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras” (Burnett 2019)—were in many cases fleeing conditions of acute violence in their countries of birth. Contemporary violence in Central America is a direct legacy of over a century of U.S. economic and military interventions within what Cecilia Menjívar and Néstor Rodríguez call “the U.S.-Latin American interstate regime” (2005, 10). Most recently, these took the form of counterinsurgency wars such as those in Guatemala and El Salvador in the late twentieth century. Such imperial adventures and extractive regimes have helped produce a region full of U.S.-made weapons and wracked by multilateral armed conflict, with livelihoods destabilized by the Dominican Republic–Central America Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA-DR) and other neoliberal reforms.

North American market demand for illicit drugs and services has also contributed to such violence. As argued by feminist philosopher Sayak Valencia in Gore Capitalism, illicit entrepreneurs such as drug traffickers take capitalism’s subordination of human lives for profit to its logical extreme, undoing taboos against murder and fusing shadow economies to the heart of state power and terror in an “episteme of violence” (2018, 36):

Gore capitalism has been created remotely from a distance to satiate the demands of the U.S. market, which has been able to set up branches and laboratoires of illegality in Third World countries. These supply illegal services and dismantle the available spectrum of economic possibilities, relegating these nations to a single type of
economy based on violence, bloodshed, and trading in illegal products and services. (191)

When we consider the particular histories and economic dynamics of the region, layered onto broader environmental and structural challenges, we can see clearly how the dispossession and displacement of people is not an unexpected or spontaneous outcome. Instead, the northward migratory movements of Latin Americans are predictable effects of the hemispheric economy, representing another dimension of what journalist Juan Gonzalez has aptly dubbed a “harvest of empire” (2011). Children in particular are disproportionately affected by the most recent spike in violence in the region, as boys and youth living in marginalized communities are especially vulnerable to this complex interplay of organized criminal and state-sponsored violence (see Chapter 11).

This pattern—the disproportionate vulnerability of children—is reflected in recent demographic shifts among those crossing the U.S.-Mexico border: while in 2013 the vast majority (87 percent) of migrants apprehended by Border Patrol were single adults, as of fiscal year 2019 a majority of migrants arrived either as part of family units fleeing together (55 percent of all apprehended persons) or as unaccompanied children traveling without an adult caregiver (9 percent). Child and family detention sites like Homestead were set up precisely to incarcerate and immobilize this exodus of young and unrecognized refugees, compounding the trauma and suffering of those who seek sanctuary. As one Central American man who had spent months detained before winning his asylum case stated, “They aggravate the suffering with psychological torture” (personal communication, November 3, 2019).

Indicative of the “minimalist humanitarianism” (see Chapter 4) that characterizes contemporary migration policy—the tendency of officials to do just enough to avoid blame and moral culpability for human rights abuses—journalists who have visited the facility report being given sanitized tours by facility staff, who showcase “the soccer field, the phone-room, the medical clinic and the school classrooms” and boast to visitors about “holiday parties, talent shows and pizza and ice cream for good behavior” (Burnett 2019). By contrast, lawyers with access to the children say that many are “extremely traumatized.” “Some . . . sit across from us [lawyers] and can’t stop crying over what they’re experiencing,” said Leecia Welch of the National Center for Youth Law (Burnett 2019). Indeed, recent reports by medical associations provide evidence of the massive traumas imposed on children through separation and incarceration in migration detention, demonstrating that these harms rise to the level of torture under
international human rights law, affirming the claim made by the asylee mentioned above (Habbach, Hampton, and Mishori 2020).

Opening with the grim scene of children trapped in what many have come to call a concentration camp situates us at the site of the most visible element of the weaponization of migration restriction in the twenty-first-century Americas: the spectacular punishment enacted on migrants by enforcement agents and within migration detention. The incarceration and public spectacles of violent deterrence against migrants are, of course, perpetuated by false narratives. So much hardline immigration enforcement, including the assertion of the state’s right to indefinitely imprison migrants without a right to a hearing, is justified on the grounds that it will keep “us” safe, replicating the false impression that those punished are a threat to society—if not, so the implicit logic goes, the state would not be making all this effort and spending all this money to address it. But by being attentive to how global capitalism, white supremacy, and U.S. imperialism (or settler colonialism) all benefit from the mass detention of poor Central American children, we reject the mythical narrative—constructed largely through opportunistic political rhetoric—of the so-called border crisis as a threat to national security. Such claims are laughable in the face of these mass casualties and this widespread social suffering—of lives lost, ruined, and plastered under the punitive conditions of the contemporary detention and deportation system. Migration in the Americas today is not a security crisis for the United States but a crisis of imposed and politically produced insecurity for transborder migrants themselves.

At the same time, the chapters that follow collectively expand our conception of state violence directed at dispossessed migrants to include less visible, often-indirect systemic actions—what Engels refers to in our epigraph as crimes of “omission.” For instance, since 2010, at least 102 people have died as a result of encounters with Border Patrol, and Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) records—which, of course, should be taken with a grain of salt—suggest twenty people died in its custody between April 10, 2018, and January 27, 2020. As disturbing as these numbers are, what they ignore are the countless others who succumbed to a too early and unnatural death while attempting to make a living under grueling labor and living conditions or while trying to cope with the constant possibility of upheaval through detention or deportation. We know that thousands more have died while attempting to cross the U.S.-Mexico border in recent years, but how many additional migrants suffer and die inside the United States because of stress-related complications, because of inhumane working conditions, and because they cannot access the health care they need?

In short, when we examine the profiteering and the systems of social control that permeate migration exclusion, it is clear that the violence is not
the result of mere negligence, and it is not an unfortunate but unavoidable side effect of the need to control some overwhelming influx of migrants (in fact, according to the Department of Homeland Security’s own data, apprehensions of people crossing without authorization have declined significantly in the twenty-first century; see U.S. Border Patrol 2020). Nor are these abuses just an example of the wanton cruelty of a few bad apples among law enforcement officers, or a result of thoughtless institutional patterns that can be repaired by electing leaders willing to make minor policy tweaks. They are not accidentally harmful policies that are unintentionally out of step with international norms and laws related to the treatment of asylum seekers. They are not exclusive to right-wing politics, brought on by a temporary wave of reactionary nativism or the last gasp of civil rights backlash. Instead, they are clues to an underlying system of social and political domination and dispossession, a system rooted in the dehumanizing logics of racism and made possible by imperialistic U.S. economic and military interventions. In the next section, we propose a theoretical framework to understand this system, to discern an order and a pattern of persecution in the fragmented accounts of migrant suffering that permeate contemporary public media, and to illuminate strategic points of critique, struggle, and survival.

Reckoning with Parasitic Violence: Migration and Imperial Haunting in the Americas

In the treatment of migrants, we see how the bodies of those deemed unworthy of citizenship or recognition—in other words, those sentenced to social death (e.g., Patterson [1982] 2018; Dayan 2011; Cacho 2012)—easily become scapegoats within the ritualized political spectacle of the state’s protective gesture toward public security. We see this clearly in the erosion of due process and human rights over the past two decades; in the ways immigration law and criminal law are converging (Stumpf 2006); in the ways migrants lack constitutional protections, including the right to a court-appointed attorney, which has forced some toddlers to defend themselves in immigration court; and in the ways the state treats migrants who die—erasing records (e.g., Baume 2019), carelessly constructing mass graves (Frey 2015), and prioritizing cost savings over the construction of meaningful spaces for mourning (Alonso and Nienass 2016).

We see it, too, in the recent Supreme Court case Hernández v. Mesa (2020), which considered whether the Mexican family of fifteen-year-old Sergio Adrian Hernández Guereca had standing to sue Border Patrol agent Jesus Mesa, who shot and killed Hernández in 2010. The teenager and his
friends—completely unarmed—had been playing on the Mexico side of the border separating El Paso, Texas, from Ciudad Juárez when Mesa fired at least two shots, killing the boy. Although the Border Patrol agent’s claim was that he was “responding to a group of suspected undocumented immigrants throwing rocks” (Wolf 2020), cell-phone video shows that Hernández was hiding beneath a train trestle when he was shot. Echoing Justice Roger Taney’s infamous Dred Scott declaration—that Blacks “had no rights which the white man was bound to respect”—Samuel Alito, writing for the majority, relied on legal fictions that prevented Mesa from being held accountable. One can only imagine how the United States would react if, over the past few decades, dozens of U.S. citizens had been shot across the border by Mexican border agents, especially if the Mexican Corte Suprema said victims’ families had no standing to sue.

Yet the Supreme Court’s decision is perfectly aligned with settler colonialism’s persistent and systemic failure to value the lives of Others, or to hold authorities accountable for such incidents of racialized state violence. The profound dehumanization of migrants through public discourse, especially over the past four decades or so, has built “popular consensus . . . around the idea that the state ought to control certain others . . . by jailing them, depriving them of basic services and civil rights, deporting them, or even killing them,” leading to the overt persecution and bald repression of the current era (Nagengast 2002, 338). In other words, “symbolic violence is displayed in the myths that depict certain people as both somewhat less than human beings, and who therefore deserve their subordinate position, and at the same time as superhumans who are capable of subverting the given social order” (339). Judith Butler points to the need to unmask what she calls “phantasmagoric inversions” (2020, 62), fantasies “in which some lives are figured as pure violence or as an imminent threat of violence” (143). Through falsely framing migrants as invaders posing an existential threat to U.S.-born people, they become marked as “ineligible for personhood,” leaving subjects in a condition of racialized rightlessness (Cacho 2012, 6).

What we are witnessing, in other words, is virulent racism, exemplified by “the state-sanctioned or extralegal production and exploitation of group differentiated vulnerability to premature death” (Gilmore 2007, 28). As Ruth Wilson Gilmore makes clear, this is best understood in conjunction with a critical analysis of capitalism. That is, while this description of the production of racialized rightlessness and the emotional politics of public violence aptly links migrants’ mortality to racism, it is crucial to also recognize the extent to which racism and capitalism are coconspirators (e.g., Du Bois [1935] 2013; Robinson 1983). As Cedric Robinson writes in his classic Black Marxism, “The historical development of world capitalism was influenced in a most fundamental way by particularistic forces of racism and
nationalism” (1983, 9). Our contention is likewise that capitalism and racism—each of which also drive contemporary militarism—are deeply intertwined, working in harmony to produce and reproduce dispossession, with dispossession understood as the opposite of “the right to the world” (Nevins 2017)—a denial of the earth’s life-sustaining common resources brought on, in part, by an exclusion from recognition as human.

Putting death through dispossession at the center of our collective analysis, the chapters in this book thus collectively illuminate what James Tyner calls “an emerging necrocapitalism,” by which, first, (racialized) lives are valued differently based on their ability to generate wealth and, second, those “who are subjected to both direct and structural violence are judged by society to be responsible for their own suffering and demise—a perverted variant of blaming the victim” (2019, xiii; emphasis in original). Necrocapitalism renders racialized bodies disposable, deciding whether one is to be kept alive or left for dead based on how much use value they offer the capitalist class. Meanwhile, the prevailing rhetoric places blame on anyone but the system: mothers who had their children ripped from their arms made a bad choice or are frauds trying to game the system; migrants making political and legal claims are accused of taking it too far, demanding special rather than equal rights (e.g., Longazel 2018); exploited, illegalized workers are framed as having failed to go through the proper procedures; and U.S.-stoked social and economic disruptions in Central America are attributed to an irresponsible citizenry.

In Slavery and Social Death ([1982] 2018), Orlando Patterson describes the slaveholder-slave relationship as a form of parasitic domination. “The slave,” he explains, “was natally alienated and condemned as a socially dead person, his existence having no legitimacy whatever.” Perversely, this created for the slaveholder an “ideal human tool, an instrumentum vocal—perfectly flexible, unattached, and deracinated” (337). Ever-parasitic and with an eerie similarity to those at the reins of contemporary migration-control regimes, the slaveholder “fed on the slave”—for labor, profit, and even the affective pleasures that come with domination (compare this to the “emotional politics of racism” explored by Ioanide 2015)—while “the slave, losing in the process all claim to autonomous power, was degraded and reduced to a state of liminality” (Patterson [1982] 2018, 337).

Despite this, or perhaps because of it, slaveholders craftily inverted reality, disguising their parasitism “by defining it as the opposite of what it really is,” as Patterson explains ([1982] 2018, 337). They insisted on the dependency of the slave, using stereotypes to project onto the enslaved person their own tendency for violence, domination, and freeloading. Such dynamics of projection, according to Michael Taussig’s classic study of cultures of terror, drove the paranoid brutality of colonizers during the rubber boom
in the Putumayo region of Colombia (1987). They are also replicated in the sweeping rhetoric and policy criminalizing transborder workers and their movements.

While Patterson’s analysis provides a useful analogy that helps us understand the intricacies of racialized capitalistic state violence, it is at the same time important that we recognize the direct historical lineages between former systems of slavery, colonialism, and genocide, and the structural oppressions of contemporary racial capitalism. The chapters in this book speak to both of these patterns. Many rely on the wide-ranging work that has deployed Patterson’s concept of social death (e.g., Chapters 5, 11, and 12), while others—such as Chapter 6, on agricultural labor—more directly engage with historical trajectories.

Either way, it is our contention that centering death and illuminating differential exposures to mortality enables us to leverage empirical truths for critical ends. Yet death also pushes us beyond the material; death produces ghosts. One effect of meditating on death is to invite ghosts to disrupt dominant social fantasies and bring a flash of recognition, revealing the settler colonial logics naturalized within systems of migration restriction (Volpp 2015). As sociologist Avery Gordon articulates in her seminal work *Ghostly Matters*, the ghost is “a symptom of what’s missing”—in this case, an insistent recognition of the unstated ugly truth of racism, materialism, and militarism at the basis of suffering—and at the same time “a future possibility, a hope” (1997, 64). The ghost is relational; ghosts shock us into a different insight about “what has happened or is happening” (63) and, through their kinship, spur us to a reckoning, “out of a concern for justice” (64). Gordon entreats us to search for lessons in the everyday hauntings we encounter, evoking the need to attend to the unseen and the unknown in the contexts of epistemic murk (Taussig 1987) fostered by violent political regimes:

There are thousands of ghosts; when entire societies become haunted by terrible deeds that are systemically occurring and are simultaneously denied by every public organ of governance and communication . . . when the whole situation cries out for clearly distinguishing between truth and lies, between what is known and what is unknown, between the real and the unthinkable and yet that is what is precisely impossible; when people you love are there one minute and gone the next; when familiar things and words transmute into the most sinister of weapons and meanings; when an ordinary building you pass every day harbors the façade separating the scream of its terroristic activities from the hushed talk of fearful
conversations; when the whole of life has become so enmeshed in the traffic of the dead and the living dead . . . the ghosts return, demanding a different kind of knowledge, a different kind of acknowledgment. (Gordon 1997, 64)

Ghosts, in other words, can be restless. And rebellion is always imminent. Patterson (1982, 337) writes, “The slave resisted his desocialization and forced service in countless ways, only one of which, rebellion, was not subtle.” This is after all why Patterson employed the analogy of the parasite to complement his rich study of social death. Typical explicators like “exploitation” and “domination,” he acknowledged, “focus upon the dominator or exploiter as the active agent in the relationship and place upon the exploited the further burden of passivity” (335).

While the following chapters most certainly recount migrants facing untold horrors, the authors simultaneously remain attentive to migrant agency and resistance. In fact, one of our larger aims is to transform death to generative purposes, falling into a tradition of similar efforts by social movements, advocates, and critical journalists. Funereal space—spaces of public mourning—have often been the spaces of last resort for communities that are heavily repressed (Gordon 1997; Klima 2002, 55–57). In Argentina, El Salvador, and other places, the Mothers of the Disappeared were among the most powerful of social movements during authoritarian regimes (Taussig 1992). Focusing on the dead, in other words, is not inherently an invocation of powerlessness and unabridged victimhood. As the world saw quite clearly after Minneapolis police murdered George Floyd, the dead can also electrify the living, mobilizing memory into resistance.

Consider the description Alan Klima gives of “the political work of the abject” in the aftermath of government-sponsored massacres against pro-democracy protesters in Thailand:

Spontaneous shrines pop up everywhere, especially at the Democracy Monument and around bloodstained trees and articles of clothing, around brains, bone, or fragments of flesh found drying in the intense heat. Jasmine garlands are strung in great numbers from the bloodstained Tree of Democracy. . . . Crowds come to the tree and bring offerings of fruits, food, and water for the spirits of the dead. (2002, 137–138)

By mobilizing the images of the dead, Thai pro-democracy activists constituted a new public sphere, which “refashioned itself out of the stuff and spiritual matter of the charnel ground itself” (Klima 2002, 151–152). This
practice of mourning and remembrance mediates and negotiates “both the
relations among the living and the relations between the living and the
dead, and so generates an economy that connects both people and time
from within the very heart of the latest in capitalism” (7).

The dead, that is, have great political efficacy: social death can engender
biological death, but biological death can engender what we call social resur-
rection. It is with good reason that the couplet penned by Greek poet Dinos
Christianopoulos (1995) has gone viral in modified form: “What didn’t you
do to bury me / but you forgot I was a seed.” Fittingly, the coalition that
successfully fought to have Homestead shut down evoked such imagery
while protesting. As the names of the seven children who have died in ICE
custody were read aloud, one of the protesters poured water into a potted
plant for each name. As Lucy Duncan of the American Friends Service
Committee said of the ceremony, “We need for justice to break through. We
need to remember those names” (CBS News 2019).

Through these two pathways—the conscious mobilization of mourning
for the dead, and the unconscious circulation of ghosts that remind us of the
unavoidable past and the accounting of debts, we intend for our contempla-
tion of death in these pages to advance the aims of justice. In that regard,
this book is also a contribution to calls for a new scholarship of account-
ability (Schwenkel 2009) and “ethical witnessing” (Ioanide 2015, 23).
Through critical research, we share in efforts to (re)member (Coutin 2016)
marginalized experiences and negotiate more inclusive forms of belonging.
In Susan Coutin’s formulation, to (re)member means to put back together
what has been dismembered by racialized systems of exclusion, and to reas-
semble the missing pieces of collective memory from whitewashed nationalist histories. Such a task is a necessary response to dispossession, or “the
dismemberment associated with civil war, displacement, emigration, the
denial of legal status, and removal” (Coutin 2016, 3; emphasis in original).

While they approach the issue of migration policy regimes and mortal-
ity from remarkably diverse angles, the contributions to this book share a
unifying set of purposes: First, we aim to illuminate the violence that per-
meates and reproduces systems of exclusion and exploitation and that is
built in large part through migration regulations and citizenship law and
their policing and enforcement—thus, to trace the causal contours of this
violence through social autopsies of human mortality (e.g., Klinenberg
2002). Second, we intend to deconstruct and denounce the mechanisms by
which this violence is normalized, justified, and reproduced. And finally, we
call for an invigorated solidarity with dispossessed peoples in movement
and an amplification of collective movements for the right to the world by
attending to and centering the loss and the survival of transborder migrant
communities.
Book Overview

The ensuing chapters are divided into four parts. The first, titled “Haunted Humanitarianism,” is intended to deconstruct humanitarian logics and unpack their relationship to systemic lethal violence. It is an attempt, in other words, to draw attention to the ghosts that haunt mainstream humanitarian discourse around migration, and the ways in which even such (mostly) well-intentioned practices reproduce violent parasitism.

Joseph Nevins opens Chapter 1 with a powerful critique of how international human rights organizations (e.g., Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch), by clinging to a nation-statist framing of migration that is exclusionary in nature, fail to “indict the very system that kills individuals trying to reach spaces of security of various sorts.” He places this critique in the larger context of global struggles over resources, where bordering also helps reproduce vast global inequalities, providing a global elite with freedom and ability to roam as they please, while dramatically restricting the global poor’s right to the world.

In Chapter 2, Alicia Ivonne Estrada uses a case study of Maya-K’iche’ migrant Hugo Alfredo Tale Yax, who was killed on a sidewalk in Queens, New York, after rescuing a woman from her violent assailant. The media’s liberal humanitarian response to Tale Yax’s death, she argues, “illustrates the selective ways in which the experiences of Maya migrants in the United States are made (il)legible and (in)visible.” She juxtaposes the media’s homogenizing depictions with the very particular Maya experience of state violence, exploitation, and dispossession as a result of the lingering consequences of the Maya genocide. Her careful analysis of media coverage and tribute videos strips off their humanitarian veneer to reveal how Tale Yax was narrowly presented as an “American hero,” rendering the genocide, like Maya migrants themselves, effectively invisible.

Marianne Madoré and Nicholas Rodrigo share findings in Chapter 3 from their ethnography of the 2019 Border Security Expo in San Antonio, Texas. They show how ICE has similarly taken up a discourse of humanitarianism, often to justify its pleas for additional funding, and even as vendors showcase high-grade militaristic tools of death in the background. Part of this construction, they reveal, involves border enforcement agents forging an esprit de corps through memorialization of fallen officers and a corresponding glorification of their own sacrifice. The reality of death at the border thus gets ritualistically converted into a tale of agents going above and beyond to both save lives and help halt a seemingly spontaneous invasion.

With the humanitarian veneer disassembled, death and dispossession are the subject of Part II. Parasitism is on full display here, as this set of
chapters explores how U.S. migration law and policy create ripe conditions for the further extraction of money, resources, and labor power from the dispossessed. In this regard, death is *productive* from the parasitic perspective; as the chapters show, there is a clear tendency of the state to employ tactics of entrapment (e.g., Núñez and Heyman 2007), which harnesses death and the threat thereof in various ways to maximize capitalists’ ability to strip resources from migrants.

Building on his highly regarded theoretical work about border spectacles and the production of deportability and illegality (e.g., De Genova 2002, 2013; De Genova and Peutz 2010), Nicholas De Genova, in Chapter 4, draws attention to the productive power of mass casualties in the U.S.-Mexico border region—namely, by drawing links between the spectacle of border deaths and the exploitation endured by those who survive. Mass death at the border, caused by policies written *with full knowledge* that they would cause many to die, he writes, “prove to be much more reliable for enacting a strategy of *capture* than for functioning as mere technologies of exclusion. Once migrants have successfully navigated their ways across such borders, the onerous risks and costs of departing and later attempting to cross yet again become inordinately prohibitive.”

Deirdre Conlon and Nancy Hiemstra collected and analyzed mounds of data obtained via the Freedom of Information Act on detention centers in three New Jersey counties. Their findings, detailed in Chapter 5, convincingly reveal how extraction is at the core of migrant detention in the United States. From excessive commissary fees and unpaid labor to profit-pursuing transportation companies and local government contracts with ICE, they show how private- and public-sector actors work together to create robust “detention economies” made possible only by the commodification of migrant life. The result, they argue, is an amplification of migrant social death, experienced by migrants as a set of losses that correspond directly to the financial gains enjoyed by the state (i.e., cost-cutting) and the corporations with which it contracts.

In Chapter 6, nursing scientists Nathan J. Mutic and Linda A. McCauley share findings from the Girasoles Study, which tracks the health consequences of migrant farmworkers’ exposure to excessive heat in Florida. Death is a very real possibility for these workers, who, they show, represent the continuation of a long, racist history—dating back to slavery—of parasitism in the agricultural sector. In this case, farmworkers confront entrapment at multiple levels—body positioning, immobility, a lack of breaks, no access to shade, and H-2A visa restrictions that prohibit them from changing employers. That, coupled with the biometric data they share, makes clear the parasitic extent to which racialized workers are indeed forced to work *beyond* their bodies’ physical limitations to satisfy capital’s relentless quest for profit.
Part III, “Epidemiologies of Living with Death,” features three chapters, which, although written from an array of methodological and disciplinary perspectives, coalesce around the theme of migration and public health. In each case, dispossession, hyperenforcement, and other antimigrant policies create a situation in which death maintains a haunting presence for migrants living in the territorial United States who—with agency, resilience, and creativity—struggle to stay fully alive.

Criminologists Daniel L. Stageman and Shirley P. Leyro begin this part in Chapter 7 with an analysis of data from focus groups and interviews with eighty noncitizens living in New York City. They explore the relationship between postmigration traumas and migrants’ experiences of mortality and morbidity. The voices of research participants vividly express the impacts of nostalgia, stress, and trauma. People excluded from citizenship expressed a state of consciousness that was unfree—“mental slavery,” in the words of one interviewee. In the context of extreme state repression, things like suicidal ideation represent “a response to a sense of inescapable entrapment in a life stripped of meaning,” Stageman and Leyro point out. Their analysis attends to the intimate relationship between resilience for individuals and collective resistance, born of a consciousness of injustice.

In Chapter 8, sociologists and demographers Juan M. Pedroza and Pil H. Chung take as their jumping-off point the Hispanic epidemiological paradox (HEP), which shows that Hispanics living in the United States, especially Hispanic immigrants, have unexpectedly enjoyed more favorable health outcomes, including a longer life expectancy, compared to other groups. However, the HEP may be beginning to erode, and Pedroza and Chung use statistical modeling to study whether the prevalence of mass deportation is part of the reason why. Merging deportation data from the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) with Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) data on mortality and American Community Survey data on disability rates, they find “that residents living in metro areas hit particularly hard by the rise of mass deportations were more likely to report health problems.” In other words, “part of the price of settling in the United States seems to have risen.”

In Chapter 9, anthropologist Nolan Kline explores the implications that the closing of a dialysis center at Grady Memorial Hospital in Atlanta, Georgia, has had for undocumented patients. In particular, this case illustrates how exclusionary migration policy and exclusionary health policy collide. Cut out from public programs, undocumented patients, he shows, are left to rely on the emergency room (ER) as their only viable option for dialysis treatment. The problem is that if they are not close enough to death upon arriving at the ER, they are turned away. Only patients exhibiting “immediate potential for death” receive the treatment. To save their own lives,
undocumented patients teeter on the brink of death, in a way that forces the
state to meet its obligation of providing minimal care. But even so, this is no
way to live; as one provider succinctly described the policy violence at hand,
“The dialysis is just enough to keep them living, and that’s about it.”

The book’s final part illuminates the means by which the United States
government outsources the suffering produced via its exclusionary policies.
Borrowing a neoliberal trick, the states’ parasitic violence is externalized to
spaces and actors beyond the territorial nation. Chapters in this section
explore social death, physical mortality, and survival, both in Central
America and along an increasingly weaponized migrant trail. Work herein
directly engages with the imperial ruination brought by U.S. militarism and
economic imperialism—the “colonial and neocolonial alchemy” that has
made Latin America “the region of open veins” (Galeano 1973, 2). It also
confronts and deconstructs the techniques by which the United States in-
creasingly outsources its harsh exclusion of migrants to deflect obligations
to refugees and asylum seekers.

In Chapter 10, Jared P. Van Ramshorst offers a critical analysis of a “me-
tering” policy, initiated by President Barack Obama but embraced by Presi-
dent Donald Trump, that allows enforcement agents to place drastic limits
on the number of asylum seekers allowed to enter the United States each
day. With resemblance to the ways prevention-through-deterrence strate-
gies reroute migrants through dangerous natural terrain, this policy diverts
migrants blocked at ports of entry back to Mexican border cities, where they
wait in shelters, parks, and other public places. “Stranded in these open
spaces for days, weeks, and sometimes months,” he writes, “migrants were
vulnerable to kidnapping, disappearances, and death.” By reconstructing
the events leading to the disappearance and death of two different asylum
seekers, Van Ramshorst makes a strong case for using a transnational lens,
revealing how a diverse set of actors and agencies are implicated in such
tragedies, and the ways that accountability for such harms are deflected.

In Chapter 11, Amelia Frank-Vitale draws from the nearly two years of
ethnographic data she collected in and around San Pedro Sula, Honduras.
She vividly documents how many young Honduran deportees are locked in
a cruel dilemma: risk potential death or incarceration by migrating again,
or remain “encaved” and socially isolated in Honduras to avoid the rampant
violence plaguing their communities. She places her analysis in the context
of U.S. imperialist interventions and a global capitalist system that treats
such poor, urban, undereducated youth of color as surplus labor. While
local elites push a narrative that blames young Hondurans for the country’s
prevailing social and economic insecurity, many young people, in the spirit
of survival, “look externally . . . for the possibility of having a better life or,
simply, a life at all.”
Karina Alma follows in Chapter 12 by drawing connections between U.S. immigration and foreign policy toward Central America and the Afro-Indigenous Miskitu men who are killed at troubling rates while working in the sweet-lobster industry off the coast of Nicaragua. Consumers in the Global North, she explains, enjoy lobster as a delicacy with little to no regard for the conditions of the fisheries that produce them. Exploring the ways that Miskitu are made socially dead, Alma invites us to recognize how the apparatus of power centered in the United States helps reproduce the exploitation, entrapment, and often death of Indigenous workers who “remain behind” in a postwar and post-CAFTA Central America.

In Chapter 13, Abby C. Wheatley emphasizes the importance of remaining attuned to migrant agency—of recognizing a politics of survival. She starts from the important premise that while there is something to be said for publicizing the causal relationship between exclusionary immigration policies and migrant death, “telling postmortem stories of migrants strips them of their agency and limits community-based strategies to respond to policies that kill.” Drawing on testimonios of migrants in the Arizona Sonora migration corridor, she highlights how Central American and Mexican migrants “survive and resist a highly militarized border and weaponized migrant trail.” Border crossings from this angle become far more than desperate attempts to avoid detection: they are part of a larger “effort to escape the constraints of a highly inequitable global system of labor” and represent a bigger struggle “over the right to life, livelihood, and autonomy.”


In the opening of this Introduction, we quite intentionally emphasize the structural conditions at Homestead, leaving aside an evocation of the people who were locked up there. But we do intend the absent figure of the child at Homestead to be presente in a ghostly fashion, present as a dialectical image.

In his “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” Walter Benjamin asks us to look for dialectical images—images like the vision of a displaced child held in a prison on polluted ground—that flare up in a moment of danger. Such images arrest our thoughts, giving us “a revolutionary chance in the fight for an oppressed past,” a hidden history of the marginalized (1968, 263). As Gordon elaborates on Benjamin’s call, she asserts that “the oppressed past or the ghostly will shock us into recognizing its animating force[, and] . . . to fight for an oppressed past is to make this past come alive
as the lever for the work of the present, ending this history and setting in place a different future” (1997, 66).

The long-standing reality that this dialectical image brings into view is that the spectacular state violence visited on migrants is not exceptional, but a logical extension of the exclusionary apparatus of neoliberal capitalism, U.S. imperialism, and racism writ large. The fact that many of the case studies analyzed herein predate the Trump administration, or span multiple eras and multiple sites, demonstrates that the interdependency between migration policy and enforcement and the “giant triplets” has always been there, right under our noses. As we go to press, uprisings against police violence and the differential effects of the COVID-19 pandemic are, for a growing number of people, unmasking the racialized abandonment and dispossession of the global poor. Removing the disguise can enable us “to move from expressing compassion to recognizing injustice,” as Didier Fassin observes (2018, 124). In other words, seeing these evils clearly—grasping the significance of this moment and its relationship to the past and to the future—is the only way to build a common future beyond walls and cages.

REFERENCES


