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Introduction

“**B**ut how can you say gentrifiers aren’t welcome when you believe no one is illegal?” asked a caller to a conservative radio talk show on which I appeared, against my better judgment. Discussing an anti-gentrification rally planned by women in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside, one of the poorest neighborhoods in Canada, I was outlining the lived experiences of escalating displacement, homelessness, and police violence when a caller hopped on and referenced my migrant justice organizing against detentions and deportations. I was being baited, of course, but the question nagged at me for months. Anti-gentrification struggles push back against the forces of racial capitalism and the entitlement of those seeking to solidify their power, as they profit from and police neighborhoods already under siege. Confronting gentrification is about opposing those who represent and reproduce structural and spatial injustice, not about preventing the movement of oppressed people seeking safety and dignity. People *do* move into the Downtown Eastside every day, in search of better services, hoping to secure social housing, care for their aging family, and knit kinship networks in a vibrant oasis of low-income residents, Indigenous matriarchs, Chinese Canadian seniors, artists, drug users, sex workers, and cacophonous dissidents. Migrants and refugees have much more in common with these humble residents than they do with rapacious hipster colonists.

While the caller was blatant and opportunistic in conflating gentrifiers with migrants and, conversely, anti-gentrifiers with border agents, the conclusion was unsurprising. Even though bordering and gentrifying regimes work to hoard wealth, displace people, and police racial segregation, the popular characterization of migrants and refugees as “foreign invaders” turns the border into a purportedly anticolonial architecture. The border, however, is less

about a politics of movement per se and is better understood as a key method of imperial state formation, hierarchical social ordering, labor control, and xenophobic nationalism.

Following Vivek Shraya, who raises the compelling question “Why is my humanity only seen or cared about when I share the ways in which I have been victimized and violated?” this book refuses anthropological consumption.¹ Numerous stories and photographs circulate about dead migrants and refugees attempting to cross the Mediterranean Sea, the Pacific Ocean, the Rio Grande, and the Sahara and Sonoran Deserts. Media images of the drowning deaths of toddlers Alan Kurdi and Angie Valeria went viral to invoke shock and sympathy, yet the same media outlets depict the world’s remaining seventy million refugees as swarms, floods, invaders. One refugee may summon pity, but large groups are painted as a threat. Instead of romanticizing migrants and refugees as either poor victims or heroic survivors, totalizing their experiences, I turn our gaze away from varied subjectivities to the systems of power that create migrants yet criminalize migration. Classifications such as “migrant” or “refugee” don’t represent unified social groups so much as they symbolize *state-regulated* relations of governance and difference.

I have previously theorized “border imperialism” to depict the processes “by which the violences and precarities of displacement and migration are structurally created as well as maintained,” including through imperial subjugation, criminalization of migration, racialized hierarchy of citizenship, and state-mediated exploitation of labor.² While *Undoing Border Imperialism* is a contribution to movement organizing, this book is a modest endeavor to more deeply interrogate the formation and function of borders as a spatial and material power structure. Borders are an ordering regime, both assembling and assembled through racial-capitalist accumulation and colonial relations. By looking at various jurisdictions around the world, I also intend to break through methodological nationalism—specifically US exceptionalism—and unearth transnational trends. Many on the left believe the cruelties of US immigration policy are homegrown and then exported, when, in fact, most repressive technologies of border rule are perfected elsewhere. *Border and Rule: Global Migration, Capitalism, and the Rise of Racist Nationalism* examines a number of seemingly disparate geographies with shared logics of border formation—displacing, immobilizing, criminalizing, exploiting, and expelling migrants and refugees—to divide the international working class and consolidate imperial, racial-capitalist, state, ruling-class, and far-right nationalist rule.

Conservatives and liberals alike conceive of US immigration policy as an issue of domestic reform to be managed by the state. Language such as “migrant crisis,” and the often-corresponding “migrant invasion,” is a pretext to shore up further border securitization and repressive practices of detention and deportation. Such representations depict migrants and refugees as the *cause* of an *imagined* crisis at the border, when, in fact, mass migration is the *outcome* of the *actual* crises of capitalism, conquest, and climate change. The border crisis, as I argue in the first part, is more accurately described as crises of displacement and immobility, preventing both the freedom to stay and the freedom to move. American liberals may demand an end to excessive violence against Latinx migrants and refugees, exemplified in their opposition to concentration camps or family separation, but they rarely locate immigration and border policies within broader systemic forces. A long arc of dirty colonial coups, capitalist trade agreements extracting land and labor, climate change, and enforced oppression is the primary driver of displacement from Mexico and Central America. Migration is a predictable consequence of these displacements, yet today the US is fortifying its border against the very people impacted by its own policies. Analyzing the border as part of historic and contemporary imperial relations, hence the term “border imperialism,” forces a shift from notions of charity and humanitarianism to restitution, reparations, and responsibility.

From the US–Mexico border’s early formation—entangled in the terrors of territorial expansion, Indigenous genocide, anti-Black enslavement, and racialized expulsion—to the more recent hemispheric war on drugs and the global war on terror, the first two chapters detail how bipartisan US immigration policy is a linchpin in synchronous domestic and global warfare. US border rule reveals seamless relations between the carceral administration of genocide and slavery at home and imperial counterinsurgency abroad, domestic neoliberal policies of welfare retrenchment and foreign policies of capitalist trade, and local and global regimes of race. This is unmistakable in the deployment of US Border Patrol Tactical Unit (BORTAC) to train border guards in Iraq and Guatemala, while engaging in SWAT-style operations to grab protestors off the streets of Portland in unmarked vehicles at the height of Black-led uprisings against police violence in 2020. This synergy between the local and global is also evident in President Donald Trump’s proposal to classify all irregular, economic migrants as “enemy combatants” and incarcerate them at Guantánamo Bay.³ The pattern of constructing migrants as enemy aliens

emerges worldwide, examined in chapter 3. Mainstream narratives of a “global migration crisis” depict migrants as threats without implicating the crises of forced dispossession, deprivation, and displacement. Capitalist dispossession and imperialist subordination manufacture bordered regimes of export processing zones in Bangladesh, land enclosures in Mozambique, and militarized settler occupation in Palestine. Border crises are, therefore, not merely domestic issues to be managed through policy reform. They must, instead, be placed within globalized asymmetries of power—inscribed by race, caste, class, gender, sexuality, ability, and nationality—creating migration and constricting mobility.

Border panics blasted in newspaper headlines take migrant “illegality” for granted, and the criminalization of migration is the focus of part 2. Displaced people become “illegal” because of multiplying technologies acting as a wall to migration, including visa restrictions, safe third country agreements, offshore detention, deportation, interdiction, militarization of maritime space, and an empire of externalization, detailed in chapter 4. Such state restrictions force people to undertake irregular, and often fatal, migration journeys. Erik Prince, operator of the world’s largest mercenary training facility and the dirty Blackwater business spanning from Iraq to New Orleans, is now peddling the idea of a public–private partnership via the burgeoning border security industry to further militarize the Mediterranean, already the world’s deadliest border.⁴ While corporate elites and politicians outdo one another to see who can build the tallest wall as an edifice to xenophobic nationalism and state sovereignty, borders are actually elastic. I explain how borders function through four primary modes of governance beyond walls: exclusion, territorial diffusion, commodified inclusion, and discursive control.

Most maps do not conceptualize the shifting cartography of borders. Bordering regimes are increasingly layered with drone surveillance, interception of migrant boats, security controls, and boots on the ground far beyond territorial limits. This is illustrated by White Australia’s exported geography of offshore detention, turning resource colonies into penal ones, surveyed in chapter 5, and Fortress Europe’s externalization of border security across waterscapes, charted in chapter 6. US, Australian, and European subordination of Central America, Oceania, Africa, and the Middle East compels countries in these regions to accept external checkpoints, offshore detention, migration prevention campaigns, and expelled deportees as conditions of trade and aid agreements. Countries in these regions including Libya, Mali, Mexico, Nauru, Niger, Papua New Guinea, Turkey, and Sudan have become the new frontiers of border

militarization. These countries are further dispossessed of their resources and their lands are now being used to build externalized infrastructures of migration control under racial imperial management. Imperialism is already a root cause of global migration, and now the management of global migration through outsourcing is also becoming a means of preserving imperial relations. Migrants and refugees, meanwhile, become bargaining chips for authoritarians like Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Turkey and General Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo (Hemedti) in Sudan. To economic dependency, climate debt, and military domination, as theorized by movement giants like Walter Rodney and Edward Said, we can also add the soft power of immigration diplomacy as a central pillar in the maintenance of our colonial present.

We are told that immigration policy is about law and order, not racial exclusion in an allegedly post-racial society. But there is no objective fact of migrant illegality; as Catherine Dauvergne maintains, “Illegal migration is a product of migration law. Without legal prohibition, there is no illegality.”⁵ While borders are hierarchically organized and permeable for white expats, a handpicked immigrant diaspora, and the rich investor class, they form a fortress against the millions in the “deportspora,” who are shut out, immobilized, and expelled.⁶ The global turn toward deportation and detention as the central means of immigration enforcement is attendant to the rise of neoliberalism. The consolidation of spatial carcerality through prisons and borders correlates with wealth concentration, dismantling of public services, and the simultaneous manufacturing and disciplining of surplus populations. Contemporary Black-led abolitionist uprisings in response to the cold-blooded police murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and countless others expose the crisis of legitimacy for the state, capitalism, and carceral regimes. Police, prisons, and borders operate through a shared logic of immobilization, containing oppressed communities under racial capitalism. Notably, the word “mob,” a criminalizing vocabulary used to link large groups of poor, racialized people to social disorder, including in inner cities and at the border, derives from the word “mobility.”⁷ Even as explicitly racist prohibitions on people of certain races or national origins have been removed from most states’ immigration policies in an era of alleged “color blindness,” mobility continues to be restricted and contained along color, class, and caste lines. Discourses of climate security, which merge the climate crisis with the migration crisis to entrench eco-apartheid, escalate this immobilization. Amid apocalyptic invocations of the climate, austerity, and migration crises, European Commission

president-elect Ursula von der Leyen, for example, suggested renaming the migration policy portfolio “Protecting Our European Way of Life.”⁸

Furthermore, regardless of actual legal immigration status, racialized others are cast as cultural outsiders in shallow and essentializing multicultural discourses. Borders and the notions of belonging they engender are not simply demarcated by towering walls experienced equally by all; they rely on and reproduce racism within the spaces they establish. A vicious cycle has developed: legal routes to migration—family sponsorship, asylum claims, and permanent residency—are limited, thus increasing irregular border crossings, which in turn become a centerpiece of dog-whistle politics about “illegals” and “too many immigrants” to justify further racist migration controls. Finally, state-centric taxonomies like “unauthorized arrival” and “asylum seeker” are only possible because of a prevailing assumption of the border as a legitimate institution of governance. Even liberals arguing for more humane immigration policies presuppose the border is natural without explaining who it serves or how it functions. Nicholas De Genova probes, “If there were no borders, there would be no migration—only mobility.”⁹ Most ironic, the migration crisis is declared a *new* crisis with *Western* countries positioned as its victims, even though for four centuries nearly eighty million Europeans became settler-colonists across the Americas and Oceania, while four million indentured laborers from Asia were scattered across the globe and the transatlantic slave trade kidnapped and enslaved fifteen million Africans. Colonialism, genocide, slavery, and indentureship are not only conveniently erased as continuities of violence in current invocations of a migration crisis, but are also the *very* conditions of possibility for the West’s preciously guarded imperial sovereignty.

Borders are not fixed or static lines; they are productive regimes concurrently generated by and producing social relations of dominance. In addition to migration being a consequence of empire, capitalism, climate catastrophe, and oppressive hierarchies, contemporary migration is *itself* a mode of global governance, capital accumulation, and gendered racial class formation. Radhika Mongia writes, “The very development of the nation-state occurred, in part, to control mobility along the axis of the nation/race,” which we see in the early organization of passports to regulate movement within the British empire, foreshadowing the modern state.¹⁰ Contrary to common analysis, borders being simultaneously monetized and militarized—open to capital but closed to people—are not contradictory juxtapositions. The free flow of capital *requires* precarious labor, which is shaped by borders through immobility. International

talk of “managed migration” and a concerted shift toward “temporary labor migration” in high-income countries unambiguously proves this requirement. In-sourced labor from labor migration programs and outsourced labor in free trade zones represent flip sides of the same coin. This is a bifurcation and segmentation of the global labor force, made precarious through bordering practices.

Part 3 of the book details the function and expansion of temporary labor migration. One of the five key features of temporary labor migration programs, described in chapter 7, is the legal tying of immigration status to employment. This turns migrant workers into a state-sanctioned pool of unfree, indentured laborers. The state differentiates these workers as *migrant* laborers, whose labor power is first captured by the border and then manipulated and exploited by the employer. Impoverishment is a consequence, not a coincidence, of capitalism. Temporary labor migration is a crucial method of accumulation, helping to facilitate the holding of more than \$9.1 trillion of global wealth by 2,200 billionaires, while the world’s poorest 3.8 billion people hold \$1.4 trillion.¹¹ Migrant workers are kept compliant through threats of termination and deportation, dangled in tandem as union-busting mechanisms, thus revealing the crucial connection between their migration status and precarious labor position. The commodified inclusion of migrant workers is “in a continuum with exclusion, rather than in opposition to it,” as border controls channel irregular migration into temporary labor migration.¹²

As the current phase of advanced capitalism, neoliberal globalization facilitates the movement of capital and militaries but restricts the mobility of impoverished racialized people *unless* they agree to inclusion as migrant workers with deflated labor power and no legal or social citizenship. We must not mistake this commodified inclusion for free migration. Migrant worker programs are carceral regimes, where many workers have their identification confiscated, are held captive in their place of employment, and are traded between employers like goods. Thus, like those of undocumented and irregular migrants and refugees, the experiences of legally authorized migrant workers are foundationally organized through immobility.

Migrant worker programs shape and are shaped by racial capitalism, where land and labor are appropriated but people are disenfranchised. Coming from Mexico and Ghana, for example, indebted farmers and peasants, displaced from their own lands and livelihoods by capitalist trade liberalization, become bonded laborers for agribusinesses in the US and Italy. Because these distinctly racialized migrant workers are categorized as “foreigners,” a material

and ideological differentiation is produced between them and citizens. This distinction further conjoins race to the nation-state, buttresses racialized and nationalized working-class identities, and exacerbates the legally constructed and state-sanctioned vulnerability of migrant workers. Migrant workers are segregated from citizen workers in a divergent labor pool and are unable to access labor protections or public services. They typically cannot bring their families and, in the case of domestic workers, perform the gendered labor of caring for others' families while forcibly separated from their own. This gendered racism is not secondary to, but rather is constitutive of, bordering practices, especially given the connection between feminization of labor, poverty, and migration. There is nothing inherently low-skill or low-wage about domestic work, but it is intentionally devalued by the workings of gendered racism through capitalism and bordered care chains.

While migrant workers are temporary, temporary migration is permanent. Temporary migration has become a modality central to state formation, citizenship regulation, labor segmentation within national labor markets, and segregated social ordering. I investigate the kafala system in the Gulf Cooperation Council countries in chapter 8 and the Temporary Foreign Worker Program in Canada in chapter 9. I chose these two programs because while the kafala is habitually dissected and condemned, Canada's program is labeled the "Rolls Royce" of labor migration. The far-right Alternative für Deutschland party, for instance, calls for German immigration policy to be based on the Canadian model.¹³ Instead of using a liberal dichotomy to position one program as "modern-day slavery" and the other as a "best practice," I suggest both are perfected systems of labor discipline and racialized exclusion. The misogynist criminal charge of absconding in the Gulf countries and the ableist issue of medical deportation in Canada provide two of the most striking examples of migrant workers' commodification and expendability. Worldwide, as we witness escalating anti-immigrant xenophobia, fearmongering about racial demographic change, and panics about job losses due to austerity, border imperialism produces migrant workers as a pool of cheapened and disposable labor without disturbing the racial social order. Labor migration thus shapes the state and capital's ability to coerce labor and manage citizenship, dovetailing perfectly into racist nationalisms.

In summary, border imperialism produces mass displacement, while immobilizing migrants through oppressive technologies that prohibit and criminalize free migration, alongside policies expanding indentured migrant labor pools, all entwined in reactionary nationalisms, the focus of part 4. In chapter 10, I trace

the connection between anti-immigrant racial violence and mounting right-wing racist nationalisms. Although far-right murders are often characterized as acts of “lone wolves,” a coordinated network of groups and governments, especially in the US, Israel, India, the Philippines, Brazil, and across Europe, are escalating fascistic hatred against both migrants and subjugated citizens. I explore how they mobilize the interlocking ideologies of ethnonationalism, penal populism, welfare nationalism, and imperial gendered racism, operating together to solidify the relationship between the state, capitalism, and racism.

Racial citizenship is a universal motivating factor for far-right voters. Anti-migrant xenophobia is mapped onto enduring racial warfare against Indigenous, Dalit, Black, Muslim, Roma, and Latinx communities, as well as social warfare against rural peasant and urban poor communities. This architecture of racist nationalism, scaffolded by xenophobia against migrants, is most evident in the unfolding crisis of statelessness. I sketch the practices of turning already-subjugated citizens into stateless noncitizens in their own countries of birth in India, Myanmar, Dominican Republic, and the Arab Gulf region. These mass disenfranchisements maintain a hierarchical social order by enshrining exclusionary racial citizenship and are as vital to producing racist nationalism as anti-migrant xenophobia itself.

Right-wing demagogues are making rising populist appeals about “foreigners” stealing *our* jobs, draining *our* services, ruining *our* environment, infecting *our* neighborhoods, and tainting *our* values. This rhetoric deflects responsibility from the underlying systems producing mass inequality, impoverishment, and misery by conveniently scapegoating “foreigners.” Right-wing populist appeals uproot class struggle from capital accumulation and elite control and, instead, overlay it with entitled and exclusionary projections of who rightfully constitutes the nation-state. Anti-immigrant sentiments underwrite this demographic racism and supplement reactionary nationalism. This manifests in working-class struggles animated by race and nationality or eco-fascist trends in environmental movements, described in chapter 11. But right-wing nationalism—pitting whites against racialized people, migrant workers against unionized workers, refugees against citizens, the West against the rest—is a ruling-class ideology. It breaks internationalist solidarity, lowers the wage floor for all workers, and maintains extractivism and exclusion in a warming world. Right-wing nationalism purports to defend the working class but is vehemently anticommunist.

The politics of fear is a distracting cover for inequality and is a material basis for the disenfranchisement of racialized communities and exploitation

of racialized workers. White supremacy within the working class is not simply misdirected rage about economic anxiety, nor is gendered racism extricable from class formation. Interpellations such as “white working class” or “national working class” exist at the expense of *all* working people, especially racialized immigrant women workers who comprise the working-class majority. Racialized women are overrepresented in the underpaid care sector, currently a front line in the struggle for a new green economy and whose value as an essential service socially reproducing life is crystal clear during the Covid-19 pandemic. Nurses, cleaners, teachers, domestic workers, grocery clerks, service workers, single mothers, and land defenders leading political struggles during the pandemic, and well before it, trenchantly assert that inequality is a product of austerity *and* also of differences made through nationality, race, gender, sexuality, and ability, which are co-constituents of class relations. As interdependent and interwoven societies, our fiercely internationalist struggle is not against “foreigners” but against any oppressors.

State responses to the global Covid-19 pandemic have blown off the lid on border and rule practices and exposed the fault lines in our societies. “Corona is the virus, capitalism is the pandemic,” rings out loudly as millions of people endure devastating job losses, appallingly inadequate healthcare, collapsed social safety nets, cruel evictions and foreclosures, and fatal working conditions from grocery stores to meatpacking factories. As Whitney N. Laster Pirtle articulates, “[R]acial capitalism is a fundamental cause of the racial and socioeconomic inequities within the novel coronavirus pandemic.”¹⁴ While the right-wing “anti-lockdown” movement is a palpable refraction of the settler-colonial logic of frontier freedom, the most under-protected are the most overpoliced by the overlapping racial-capitalist state forces of, as Ruth Wilson Gilmore depicts it, organized abandonment alongside organized violence.¹⁵ Refugees and migrants are bearing a disproportionate distribution of risk and violence. Despite no directive from the World Health Organization to do so, and in violation of the legal principle of non-refoulement forbidding states from returning a person to a country where they may face persecution, a staggering fifty-seven countries have shut their borders to people seeking safety.¹⁶

The pandemic, like every global crisis before it, provides a perfect excuse to hasten in the vision of securitized borders and usher states of emergency into permanency. The government of Malta abandoned several boats carrying refugees and migrants in the Mediterranean, claiming it was too overwhelmed by the pandemic. In one instance, Malta ignored distress calls from passengers on a