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The Migrant Image

Fear of ‘Replacement’ and the Resurgence of White Nationalism

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A twenty-five-year-old man tries to swim across the river Rio Grande with his nearly two-year-old daughter on his back; she is tucked under his t-shirt with her arms around his neck. He doesn’t make it. A current sweeps them away and they drown, their bodies washing up facedown along the shore, in the reeds, with blue beer cans bobbing nearby. The child has slipped to the side, one arm still around her father’s neck, evidence of a diaper under her red shorts. A photo of their corpses in the water goes viral, distributed by the Associated Press around the world and picked up by major media, a picture that allows us to look down upon them from a height of safety. Is it a picture of a foolhardy venture or an act of desperation driven by terror (1.1)?

The man is Óscar Alberto Martinez Ramirez with his daughter Valeria. Mexican photojournalist Julia Le Duc took the photo. Ramirez and Valeria had traveled from El Salvador and spent some months in Mexico trying to negotiate the nearly impossible asylum process before Ramirez decided to swim from Matamoros to Brownsville, Texas. His wife, Valeria’s mother, swimming some way behind them, saw them go down and returned to shore. Ramirez and Valeria are only two of thousands who have tried, one way or another, to make the crossing, only to die—by drowning, thirst in the desert, gunfire, animal attack, or abandonment in airless locked trucks by the “coyotes” who took their money and promised to escort them to safety. The hopeful path to a presumed haven in the U.S. is marked by an endless stream of dead bodies.

In an essay in the New York Times Magazine, Teju Cole traces the responsibility of many U.S. presidents for the deaths of those like Ramirez and Valeria. He notes that Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush both supported El Salvador’s military-led government in a civil war in which tens of thousands of Salvadorans died and hundreds of thousands fled to the U.S. Bill Clinton conferred only “temporary protected status” on them, forcing them to go back at the end of the war, and many formed or joined gangs now heavily involved in the violence there. Barack Obama oversaw an increase in the apprehension and deportation of almost three million undocumented immigrants, more than any other president so far. In 2016, Donald Trump was elected president after repeatedly calling migrants “drug dealers,” “rapists,” and “criminals,” even though evidence shows that immigration correlates with lower crime rates. His administration funded Salvadoran security forces that illegally executed dozens of suspected gang members. Both Democratic and Republican administrations have clearly played a major role in producing the ongoing social, economic, and humanitarian crisis.

In 2018, Trump declared an end to the temporary protected status of almost 200,000 people from El Salvador who had fled a series of earthquakes there in 2001, cutting off their support to relatives at home and further devastating the Salvadoran economy. This was followed by a
“metering” policy that slowed the processing of asylum claims to almost nothing and created a huge backlog, the one in which Ramirez and his family were trapped. Trump then declared that no further aid would be given to Guatemala, Honduras, or El Salvador until they reduced migration to the U.S., exacerbating the very conditions that were driving desperate migration in the first place.2

Teju Cole asks, “Do we need the spectacle of corpses to make the story real?” Cole questions the newsworthiness of picturing destroyed brown bodies, observing that destroyed white bodies seldom make the front page of the newspaper. “These photographs are mirrors, not windows,” asserts Cole, reflecting the fact that the crime was committed by the viewers of the photograph … not personally but as a member of the larger collective. It is you who have undermined their democracy, you who have devastated their economy, you who have denied their claim to asylum.3

![Image](https://via.placeholder.com/150)

*Figure 1.1* The bodies of Salvadoran migrant Oscar Alberto Martínez Ramírez and his nearly two-year-old daughter Valeria on the bank of the Rio Grande in Matamoros, Mexico, June 24, 2019, after they drowned trying to cross the river to Brownsville, Mexico.

*Source:* AP Photo/Julia Le Duc

But this is wrong-headed. We must not ignore the class divide in the U.S. any more than in Guatemala, Honduras, or El Salvador. It is the ruling class—whose interests are defended by Democratic and Republican presidents alike—that has undermined democracy, devastated economies, and denied asylum claims to those fleeing from violence, poverty, and the destructive effects of climate change on agricultural farms. The oppression of migrants is rooted in social and economic structures marked by class contradictions, a system ruled by profit that devalues the poor and people of color as socially expendable. We do need to see the pictures—to
A plethora of art exhibitions on the plight of refugees opened across the U.S., including *The Warmth of Other Suns: Stories of Global Displacement* at the Phillips Collection in Washington, D.C., in partnership with the New Museum in New York City (June to September 2019). Works in these exhibitions, such as Albanian artist Adrian Paci’s short video *Centro di Permanenza Temporanea* (‘Centre of Permanent Temporariness’), help illuminate the perspective of refugees and migrants, who feel compelled to leave their country despite becoming stateless and rightless.4

In Paci’s video, a group of refugees approach in single file a set of isolated airline boarding stairs standing near a runway in an open landscape. They climb up to the platform and fill the stairs. Then they wait. Several planes trundle by and take off, but none approach the boarding stairs Centre of Permanent Temporariness (1.2).

Paci focuses on the feet and faces of those who wait, suggesting their fatigue while scanning facial expressions of patience, resignation, numbness, disgust. They remain quietly crowded together on these stairs to nowhere in a no man’s land, apparently abandoned and forgotten. They are rightless people stranded in a placeless place. Paci’s video conveys the ultimate loss of identity and home through migration and displacement.

*Figure 1.2* Adrian Paci, *Centro di Permanenza Temporanea* (Centre of Permanent Temporariness), 2007, video, color, sound, 4’32” (still from video). *Source:* Courtesy of the artist and kaufmann repetto Milano/New York and Peter Kilchmann, Zürich

Another real-life version of a doomed venture is pictured by Detroit-based photographer Kenny Karpov in his series of migrant rescues on the Mediterranean from his Detroit exhibition and book *Despite It All We Never Learn*. Karpov spent more than four years accompanying rescue crews from a number of non-governmental organizations, whose mission is to save as many people as possible from drowning; they also treat injuries and offer food, water, and
clothing to migrants escaping from war-torn countries such as Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq or in search of jobs to support their families. His photo of a white dinghy floating in the sea is overcrowded, with about 180 primarily Nigerian men aboard (Figure 1.3).

Figure 1.3 Kenny Karpov, refugees in the Mediterranean Sea after setting off from Libya to Malta on a flimsy inflatable raft before being rescued, 2016.
Source: Courtesy Kenny Karpov

According to Karpov, the refugees have no idea how long the journey will be when they set off from Libya to Malta and are told by smugglers—sometimes former cops or politicians, who charge them enormous sums for a spot in a raft—that they will reach land in three hours. In reality it will be at least four days—about two days longer than the flimsy rafts can stay afloat. Sometimes smugglers also sell them cheap life vests that will not keep them from sinking for more than five minutes and will not keep their head above water. The far more effective bright orange life vests the men wear in the photo were provided by the rescue ship. And if they are rescued, what happens to most? European countries have slowed acceptance of refugees and established increasingly restrictive policies, or they are put in migrant detention centers, or they end up in underground economies as prostitutes or selling weed, or they are sold into forced labor for slave wages on farms and in restaurants.5

The journeyers in Karpov’s photo are so crowded together that those along the edges of the raft swing their legs over the side, their feet nearly touching the water, while the bodies crammed together and the repetition of dark limbs against the white raft evoke the teeming cargoes of slave ships. Like those once subjugated people, these refugees adrift on the high seas have no control, no agency, no recourse to safety unless they are spotted by a rescue ship. Since 2015, about 16,000 people are estimated to have drowned in similar rafts (though the number may be higher), death traps that are bought by smugglers by the shipping container from China for a few hundred dollars each. The refugees are therefore as subject to death by drowning, injury, or
illness as to rescue and survival, and the white raft, like a flattened white whale, becomes an emblem of a quest that often ends in disaster.

Karpov makes it a point never to represent the rescued refugees at their most abject, refusing, in effect, to point the camera down from a privileged position and causing some NGOs to fire him for this reason; instead, he insists on preserving the dignity and humanity of the refugees who have been terrorized in their home countries, abused and deceived by smugglers, and are often terrorized once more if they manage to reach a foreign shore.

The Violence of White Nationalism

If we understand state terrorism to mean violence perpetrated by a government against non-combatants, we may regard the election of Trump as inaugurating a new reign of terror aimed particularly at Muslims, Central Americans seeking asylum in the U.S., and immigrants of color from anywhere. Most of those who make it across the U.S.-Mexican border are imprisoned in detention camps and live in horrendous conditions of squalor, abuse, deprivation, and extreme overcrowding, rendering the U.S. government one of the world’s most active and malicious agents of terror today. Caged and terrified children, who are traumatized, helpless, and forcibly separated from their parents, effectively represent the vulnerability of all refugees produced by global capitalism, who are infantilized, dehumanized, and discarded by the increasingly paranoid and conservative white elite striving to maintain its wealth and privilege. Neoliberalism’s attendant conditions of war, poverty, violence, and ecological disaster, which drive the migration of populations, also drive the intensification and mainstreaming of white nationalist terror, which has found an ardent exponent in the person of Donald Trump and his administration.

In a speech he gave in Poland in 2017, Trump called for the defense of Western civilization, which was widely understood as a white nationalist dog whistle endorsing Islamophobia. Steve Bannon and Stephen Miller, Trump’s white nationalist advisers, shaped this speech, and, despite Bannon’s departure from the administration, Miller continues to shape immigrant policy. As novelist Pankaj Mishra argues, the pseudoscience of racial inferiority and “higher races” has “reached its final and most desperate phase, with existential fears about endangered white power” now rampant in the white Anglosphere. Trump expressed these fears when he asserted in his speech, “The fundamental question of our time is whether the West has the will to survive.”

Mishra points out that the global migration and race mixing of the late nineteenth century paved the way for eugenics, social Darwinism, and restrictive immigration laws. In the U.S., this peaked with the 1924 immigration law—admired by Hitler and by former Trump Attorney General Jeff Sessions—that set immigration quotas that impeded Jewish immigrants, among others, and completely barred Asians. “By the early 20th century,” writes Mishra, “violence against indigenous peoples, immigrants and African Americans reached a new ferocity, and nativist and racist demagogues entrenched a politics of dispossession, segregation and disenfranchisement.” We have seen a revival of such violence and white nationalist entrenchment, from Republican efforts to disenfranchise black voters anew in state and national elections to Trump’s ominous war on Muslims and immigrants.6
In Europe, the European Union—a set of treaties designed to maximize profits by increasing exploitation of workers across Europe—has had a devastating impact on working conditions and living standards, from imperialist centers such as England, Germany, and France to economically distressed countries such as Greece, Ireland, Poland, and other East European countries. This has emboldened racist, right-wing demagogues like Nigel Farage in Britain and outright fascists like Marine Le Pen in France, Norbert Hofer of the Freedom Party of Austria, and Geert Wilders in the Netherlands. These white nationalist politicians, along with parties such as Alternative for Germany (AfD), Finns Party in Finland, and the Danish People’s party, also campaign against migrants and asylum seekers; they are anti-Muslim as well as antisemitic.

Are white nationalism and white supremacy different? Most analysts see them as the same or overlapping or regard white nationalism as a rebranding of white supremacy, which has developed negative connotations, while promoting white nationalism as merely a matter of “ethnic” and “national” pride. Both white supremacists and white nationalists believe that whites are a “race,” one that is innately superior to people of other races, and that racial discrimination should be incorporated into law. White nationalists focus on a belief in a predominantly white nation in which whites maintain political, economic, and cultural dominance. This means not just protecting a white majority by severely restricting immigration but also forcibly expelling nonwhite citizens.

One of Trump’s first acts in office was the attempt to ban immigrants from seven majority-Muslim countries. He further opposed immigrants from Haiti, El Salvador, and certain countries in Africa he called “shithole countries” while promoting immigration from places like Norway, an undisguised appeal to white supremacist and “racial purity.” He promoted the “birther” lie that Barack Obama was born in Kenya and earlier called for the execution of the Central Park Five, a group of young black men accused of rape and murder who were proven innocent. Trump has been consistent in his attempts to normalize and mainstream virulent white nationalism and has garnered sympathetic allies among white nationalist politicians abroad.

Trump also made clear that his cruel policy of separating children from their families—with no plan for reuniting them with their parents—was designed to terrorize migrant families and deter future migration, despite the legal right to seek asylum in the U.S. and the fact that many seek to escape from the homicidal gangs that effectively run their countries, which the U.S. played a key role in bringing about. Moreover, the fivefold increase in the number of migrants from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras making their way to the southern border between 2010 and 2015 coincided with an unusually dry period, produced by climate change, that cut crop production or wiped out entire harvests and that left many with not enough food—a problem that continues to get worse. According to a report by the World Bank, climate change will produce at least 1.4 million climate migrants from Mexico and Central America during the next three decades.

The Trump administration has done its utmost to impede the process of American citizenship. For those already living in the U.S. there is a backlog of 900,000 cases, so that the waiting period for an asylum claim to be heard in court can be years. Families often have children and find jobs in that time, and because only about twenty percent of claims are granted, those denied asylum often stay anyway. At ports of entry, the courts have allowed the Department of Homeland Security to order asylum seekers to wait in Mexico for their cases to proceed, often with no
access to lawyers and in terrible conditions, while “metering” slows processing to a trickle. As of 2019, some 16,000 migrants were waiting in Mexican towns such as Tijuana.10 Trump has “jokingly” encouraged U.S. soldiers to fire on asylum seekers, suggesting that shooting migrants may be the only effective way to keep them out of the country. One self-styled militia, the “United Constitutional Patriots,” went on patrol and detained 200 migrants at gunpoint. According to a police report, when one militia member suggested putting away their weapons and acting only as observers, another, arguing Trump’s logic, said, “Why are we just apprehending them and not lining them up and shooting them? We have to go back to Hitler days and put them all in a gas chamber.”11 Indeed, Trump has called migrants “animals” who are “invading” the country or suggested they will “infest” the U.S., using language reminiscent of the Nazi designation of “vermin” for the Jews.

Immigrant detention facilities are clearly inhumane. In a report condemning the “egregious” conditions at ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement) facilities, the Office of Inspector General recounts examples of the intense overcrowding: A cell with a maximum capacity of twelve held seventy-six detainees; a cell with a maximum capacity of eight held forty-one detainees; a cell with a maximum capacity of thirty-five held 155 detainees. The report plaintively asserts that detainees “cannot continue to be held in standing-room-only conditions for weeks.”12 As of June 2019, nearly 50,000 people were detained in ICE facilities, and more than 2,300 children were separated from their parents. Over 900 children were taken from their parents after Trump “officially” ended the policy of family separation for reasons as minor as a parent not changing a baby’s diaper or having a traffic citation for driving without a license. Twenty-four adults have died in ICE custody since Trump took office, and at least seven children have died in the custody of other immigration agencies during the same period.13 An NBC News investigation found that under both the Obama and Trump administrations ICE has routinely placed immigrant detainees suffering from mental illness or medical issues in solitary confinement, where their pleas for medical care are routinely ignored. Some commit suicide. Some are so ill they die shortly after being released. Migrant children have died of influenza in hospitals, or at highway checkpoints while being moved from one facility to another. One seven-year-old, Jakelin Caal Maquin, died of an infection that caused multiple organ failure after being sent on a ninety-mile bus ride to another location by Customs and Border Protection even though her father told authorities she was ill and vomiting. These are grim and lonely deaths. Human rights lawyer Leah Chavla cites concerns about lack of hygiene, nutritionally inappropriate food, and being woken throughout the night. A Human Rights Watch report notes frigid temperatures in the facilities and children sleeping under thin Mylar blankets or foil wrappers.14

A report by the ACLU released in May 2018, based on 30,000 documents obtained through the Freedom of Information Act, includes allegations of physical, verbal, sexual, and psychological abuse of migrant children and the denial of clean drinking water and adequate food. Children report being incapacitated by Tasers, denied medical attention, forced into stress positions, threatened, beaten, subjected to sexual violence, and forced to sleep on concrete floors. Many have written their own reports of being terrorized and abused.15 The failures of the U.S. government to provide adequate safeguards and humane protections for children in the custody of Customs and Border Protection, notes the report, “have allowed a culture of impunity to
flourish within CBP, subjecting immigrant children to conditions that are too often neglectful at best and sadistic at worst.”16 In June 2019, the Trump administration announced it would end schooling, recreational activities, and access to legal aid for children in detention.

Perhaps the most egregious example of abuse is that of Darlyn Valle, ten, who died after entering Office of Refugee Resettlement custody, though her death was not revealed to the public for nearly eight months. She entered custody as a medically fragile child with a history of congenital heart defects and underwent a surgical procedure at a facility in Arizona with later complications that left her in a coma. She was kept in custody for seven months before ORR sent her to Nebraska, just three days before her death, in an effort to reunite her with her mother. She died of fever and respiratory distress.17 The legal limit for Border Patrol to detain children is seventy-two hours; they are then supposed to be transferred to the custody of the Office of Refugee Resettlement for a maximum of twenty days. Even these oppressive rules have been ignored, and the Trump administration has proposed detaining children together with their parents indefinitely while criminal or immigration proceedings are being resolved, a process that can take months or years.18

Figure 1.4 A two-year-old Honduran asylum seeker cries as her mother is searched and detained near the US-Mexico border on June 12, 2018, in McAllen, Texas.
Source: Photo by John Moore/Getty Images

A small child in a red sweatshirt cries miserably as she stands between a van and her mother in the darkness while a Border Patrol agent body searches her mother, his blue-gloved hands at her waist. The child and mother are turned toward each other, the mother’s body the only thing between the child and the man, but the mother’s arms are stretched out, her hands against the van, unable to hold or comfort her child while the patrol agent looms over them both. According to the photographer, John Moore, the child began crying in despair the moment her mother was
forced by the patrol agent to set her down. Moore has shot the image from the child’s perspective, cutting off from view the shoulders and heads of the adults (1.4).19

The terrified little girl displays the intense separation anxiety that all migrant children who are forcibly wrenched from their parents must feel, though here her helpless mother is only inches away. The photo is one of two pictures by Moore of the child crying that made news around the world and became the face of Trump’s “zero tolerance” policy requiring the arrest of all undocumented immigrants who cross the border and the separation of children from families. The mother, Sandra Sanchez, and her daughter, Yanela, were asylum seekers who had rafted across the Rio Grande from Mexico and were detained by U.S. Border Patrol agents before being sent to a processing center for possible separation (though in the end they remained together). Sanchez told Moore that they had been on the road for a month.20 We can only imagine the hardships a lone woman and child might endure on such a perilous journey, the terror and dependence of the child on the mother.

In other attempts to halt immigration, subject to legal challenges, Trump would permit anyone to be stopped on the street by federal agents and asked to “show proof” that they were citizens or have lived in the U.S. for more than two years. This would allow the arrest and deportation of asylum seekers without a hearing before a judge and even risk the deportation of U.S. citizens if they couldn’t prove their citizenship in a satisfactory manner. In another tactic, the Trump administration announced it would deny protections to immigrants who failed to apply for citizenship in at least one country they passed through on their way north. This would prevent nearly all Central Americans who seek asylum from entering the U.S., as well as those from Haiti, Cuba, countries in Africa, and elsewhere.21

In a medieval throwback, there’s also the Trump wall, a central plank of his presidential election campaign. Once in office, Trump shut down the American government for five weeks in the failed hope of securing billions of dollars for a proposed expansion of the existing barrier on the southern border, despite his repeated assertions during the campaign that Mexico would pay for it. Following this longest shutdown in American history, Trump declared a national emergency along the Mexican border, with plans to transfer funds from the Pentagon budget, bypassing Congress, and taking money from such projects as schools on military bases. The proposed border wall, like the Separation Barrier that Israel built on Palestinian land around Jerusalem, represents a form of repressive architecture that attempts to turn the entire country into a “gated community” based on race and ethnicity. The border wall symbolizes the alienation of the migrant as illegal, different, inferior, dangerous, and criminal.22

In a work created by the French artist who goes only by the initials JR, a cardboard cutout of a curious little boy in Tecate, Mexico, peers over the barrier wall that borders San Diego County. The giant child rising almost seventy feet in the air reasserts a sense of immigrant agency as he looms over the Border Patrol agents who gaze up at him, seemingly helpless, from the other side. Posted by JR on Instagram, this photo of his work quickly went viral. The Mexican boy suggests a far greater physical and historical presence than the dwarfed white men, while his playfully flexed fingers on the barrier wall suggest he might easily tip it over, as if it were a toy fence—a metaphor for the ultimately fruitless attempts to prevent the “browning” of America by a white nationalist minority.
In a fitting irony, the installation was completed just after Trump first announced his attempted cancellation of the Obama-era DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) program, suggesting the unstoppable power of future generations of immigrants. The DACA program affects nearly 800,000 young people known as “Dreamers,” who were brought to the U.S. illegally as children but have grown up in the U.S. Under DACA, they are protected from deportation and allowed to work legally in the U.S.\textsuperscript{23}

The work is based on JR’s photo of David Enrique, nicknamed “Kikito,” a one-year-old who lives with his mother and grandparents in Tecate.\textsuperscript{24} “The history of humanity is the story of people migrating,” observes JR. “For this little kid, there are no walls and borders.”\textsuperscript{25} Kikito’s mother told JR,

I hope this will help people see us differently than what they hear in the media, that they will stop treating us like criminals or rapists. I hope in that image they won’t only see my kid. They will see us all.\textsuperscript{26}

Despite the demonization of people south of the U.S.-Mexican border as monstrous invading aliens, JR’s border installation offers a perspective of innocence and latent power.

What’s in a Name?

The ICE detention centers are concentration camps, as Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez told her Instagram followers, causing a backlash from those who argued that Ocasio-Cortez was trivializing the Holocaust. It was not only the conservative right that objected; even the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum issued a formal statement that the Museum “unequivocally rejects efforts to create analogies between the Holocaust and other events, whether historical or contemporary.” This is an astonishing pronouncement, which rejects any efforts to compare the Holocaust to any other events, in the past or the present.

In response, a public letter with 580 signatures, including many Holocaust scholars and leading academics from the United States, Canada, Europe, Israel, Asia, and Australia, urged USHMM to retract this statement, pointing out, “The Museum’s decision to completely reject drawing any possible analogies to the Holocaust, or to the events leading up to it, is fundamentally ahistorical.”\textsuperscript{27} Timothy Snyder in Slate wrote that the Holocaust Museum “has made nonsense of the slogan ‘never again’ and provided moral cover for ongoing and oppressive American policies.”\textsuperscript{28} In a Facebook post, the original authors of the letter argued that the museum’s statement is at odds with USHMM’s own programs on the comparative study of global genocides, that it’s a form of thought-policing, that comparison is fundamental to understanding history and the world, and that the statement distances the museum from a large body of historical scholarship.\textsuperscript{29}

Concentration camps do not have to look like Auschwitz. There have been concentration camps in France, South Africa, Cuba, the Soviet Union, and in the U.S., with the internment of the Japanese. As Andrea Pitzer, author of \textit{One Long Night: A Global History of Concentration}
Camps, asserts, “We have what I would call a concentration camp system, and the definition of that in my book is, mass detention of civilians without trial” based on group identity. The conservative intellectual Michael Anton, whom Trump hired as a senior White House adviser, defined this group identity as “Third World foreigners.” Jewish groups, however, mobilized in cities across the country holding signs that said “No Kids in Concentration Camps” and “Never Again means never again for anyone”.

![Figure 1.5 Overcrowding of families observed by the DHS Office of Inspector General on June 11, 2019, at Border Patrol’s Weslaco, TX, station. Source: Photo by U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Office of Inspector General](image)

It is not the Holocaust that is trivialized by recognizing these detention centers for what they are; on the contrary, it is critics of the concentration camp designation who are trivializing the officially sanctioned cruelty and unconscionable abuse of these refugees and asylum seekers, both adults and children. The camps are a form of government-perpetrated violence based on mass detention without trial; they construct a form of white nationalist state terror promulgated and expanded by the white-nationalist-in-chief who occupies the White House.

**A Legacy of White Nationalism**

Neo-Nazis, right-wing militias, and neo-Confederates of all stripes have been elated and emboldened by Trump’s election. They regularly turn up at Trump rallies, and his rhetoric has encouraged a huge increase in hate crimes in cities across the United States. One of the best known examples is the murder of anti-racist protester Heather Heyer and the injury of nineteen
others by a white nationalist, who plowed into them with his car at a “Unite the Right” rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, in 2017. For his part, Trump condemned violence “on both sides” and suggested that the white nationalists in Charlottesville included some “very fine people.” He may have been thinking of his father, Fred Trump, one of seven men arrested on Memorial Day in 1927 while participating in a march by a thousand white-robed Klansmen through a Jamaican neighborhood in Queens, New York. Fred Trump was also notorious for his refusal to rent to potential black tenants in the real estate and construction business now owned by Donald Trump. In 1973, both father and son were sued by the U.S. Justice Department’s Civil Rights Division for racial discrimination.

In July 2019, Donald Trump caused a firestorm by tweeting—his favored form of official public statement—that four Democratic women of color who opposed a bill funding border police facilities should “go back and help fix the totally broken and crime infested places from which they came,” though all four are not only U.S. citizens but also duly elected members of the U.S. House of Representatives. The taunt echoes a well-worn racist trope, recalling, for example, the nine black teenagers who integrated a school in Little Rock, Arkansas, in 1957, while a mob of a thousand white people shouted, “Go back to Africa.”

By accusing the freshman congresswomen—Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez of New York, Ilhan Omar of Minnesota, Ayanna Pressley of Massachusetts, and Rashida Tlaib of Michigan—of “hating America” and “supporting Al Qaida” and telling them to leave the country, Trump demonstrated the vicious racial animosity that was the basis of his campaign strategy starting in 2015. He reinforced his inflammatory remarks a few days later at a rally in Greenville, North Carolina. Stoking racial controversy, he cast those who oppose him as anti-American and dangerous extremists—especially Ilhan Omar, a Muslim born in Somalia—in an effort to normalize his own white nationalist extremism, roll back the gains of the civil rights movement, and set the stage for even more egregious forms of racist, anti-immigrant terror. All four women received death threats, especially Omar, including a phone call to her office by a man threatening to “put a bullet in her.”

Sinking even lower, if possible, the Trump administration quietly sent letters to the immigrant families of hospitalized children with severe and life-threatening illnesses in the U.S., informing them that medical deferments were withdrawn and giving them thirty-three days to remove their children from lifesaving treatments and leave the country. This was so vile and inhumane that no official announcement was made. When news leaked and outrage spread, the administration reversed itself.

The question, then, is who has the right to be an American? The volatile debate over immigration and the creation of “new Americans” exposes a fundamental contradiction in American life that originates with the founding of the U.S. as a nation, when “equality” meant equality for white men only, not for indigenous people, not for women, and not for the millions of black people who were enslaved. Many of the men who wrote or signed the Declaration of Independence and led this country from its inception, loudly proclaiming the right to liberty, equality, and the pursuit of happiness, were slaveholders. It took a civil war to end slavery, but equality has never truly been achieved. Perhaps it is no surprise that white nationalists believe this country was founded as a nation for white people.
Mass Protests and White Extinction Anxiety

Trump’s slogan, “Make America Great Again,” is widely understood—by both Trump’s supporters and his detractors—as “Make America White Again.” If this means forcibly expelling families who have lived in the U.S. for years, many of whom have children who were born here and are therefore citizens, or whose children will die if withdrawn from lifesaving treatment, compelling them to “go back where they came from,” this wrings no tears from white nationalists. ICE roundups and threats of ICE roundups across the country are another way of terrorizing undocumented immigrants and families who fear being torn apart. In July 2019, widely publicized ICE raids began in more than a dozen cities, but of the more than 2,100 migrants who were targeted, only thirty-five were arrested, including collateral arrests of people never targeted and at least two U.S. citizens, both of whom had the proper paperwork, one of whom was detained for thirty hours and the other for almost a month.

The advance notice gave immigrant advocates time to counsel families about their rights, which included not opening the door or answering questions, and on social media, community groups shared information about sightings of ICE agents. In addition, thousands of protesters and “protectors” took to the streets across the nation and even shut down ICE headquarters in Washington, D.C. Protestors turned out in many cities and at the underpass outside the Fort Sill military base in Oklahoma. The base was once used to cage indigenous people and Japanese Americans and was about to open as another child concentration camp. The following month, in a quietly coordinated operation, about 600 ICE agents arrested almost 700 immigrant workers at seven chicken processing plants in Mississippi, and many children came home to find that their parents had simply disappeared.

The slogans “Make America Great Again” and “America First” revive a memory of native and European fascist movements; Trump’s authoritarian claims on state power and the attacks on migrants and asylum seekers as well as on blacks, Latinxs, Muslims, the LGBTQ community, and Jews—considered non-white by white supremacists—arouse increasing alarm as violence and threats of violence continue to surge. In October 2018, a shooter identified as a white nationalist killed eleven Jews and injured seven more at a synagogue in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, after posting antisemitic comments online that also referred to Central American migrant caravans and immigrants. In January 2019, three Trump supporters belonging to a militia group called the “Crusaders” were each sentenced to twenty-five years in prison for plotting to massacre Somali Muslims in Garden City, Kansas. That same month, two more Trump-supporting militia group members pleaded guilty to bombing a Somali mosque in Minnesota. These acts of domestic terrorism take Trump’s rhetoric to its logical conclusion.

The Southern Poverty Law Center notes that white nationalists in the U.S. have been inspired by Pat Buchanan’s 2001 book The Death of the West, which argues that “declining white birth rates and an ‘immigrant invasion’ will transform the United States into a third world nation by 2050.”32 Many white nationalists cite this text as responsible for their “awakening,” or “red pill.” Their goal is to establish a white “ethnostate” that would not only restrict immigration but would also dismantle social welfare programs. Mostly downwardly mobile, lower middle-class men who experience economic displacement because of globalization and neoliberal economics,
these men who believe they are entitled to something better—to an “American Dream”—feel emasculated, as sociologist Michael Kimmel argues. White nationalist organizations offer not only a sense of belonging but also a restoration of masculinity.33

White nationalists are also obsessed with declining white birth rates and believe that white women should assume as their primary responsibility the role of wife and homemaker in order to raise white children. Many white nationalists were inspired, among others, by Anders Behring Breivik, who killed eight people by detonating a van bomb in Oslo, then massacred sixty-nine young people at an island summer camp to publicize his white nationalist manifesto in which he blamed feminism for a European “cultural suicide” and called for the deportation of all Muslims from Europe.

White nationalists were also inspired by the male shooter who massacred fifty-one Muslims and injured forty-nine more inside two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, in 2019. The gunman was a white nationalist who supported the Identitarian movement premised on the “Great Replacement” or “white replacement” conspiracy theories that posit a concerted plan to replace whites with non-whites through immigration, abortion, intermarriage, racial integration, and land confiscation. In 2017, the white nationalists in Charlottesville chanted, “You will not replace us!” and “Jews will not replace us!” demonstrating their embrace of “replacement theory” as well as the global connections among white nationalists, who fear an existential threat to their existence. An anti-immigrant screed written by the white male shooter who killed twenty-two people and injured two dozen more at a Walmart in El Paso, Texas, in 2019 also cited the “great replacement” theory. His racist manifesto, posted online minutes before the massacre, said his attack was a response to a “Hispanic invasion of Texas.”

There are a variety of sources for replacement theory, which has been expressed in Europe, North America, South Africa, Russia, and Australia, including the neo-Nazi concept of “white genocide,” which refers primarily to contraception and abortion, and French right-wing theorist Renaud Camus’s 2012 book The Great Replacement, which focuses on the replacement of Christian white people in France with Muslims. The two ideas have merged into “white extinction anxiety,” a phrase coined by New York Times columnist Charles Blow, which refers to the fear that whites will become a minority stripped of race-based privilege. This belief that whites must maintain political, economic, and cultural hegemony, along with a form of aggressive white patriarchal masculinity, has become the basis of Trump’s rhetoric. Trump uses the gendered, racialized body of the white male as a “proxy for the nation” and locates threats to the nation in “women’s and non-white male bodies.”34

Theories of white replacement have been mainstreamed on the news channel Fox News, which is well known as an important propaganda pipeline for Trump, especially through the prime time commentators Tucker Carlson and Laura Ingraham. Both commentators use blatant racist language and have variously suggested that immigrants make America dirty, have compared children in cages to summer camps, and hosted antisemites and white nationalist conspiracy theorists. Commentators on Fox News employed images of the migrant caravan to raise fears of an “invading horde” about to “rush the border,” relentlessly warning of an “invasion” in the days before the 2018 midterm elections. One guest on the news program, former immigration agent David Ward, claimed, without evidence, that migrants traveling in a caravan through Mexico were bringing leprosy, tuberculosis, and smallpox—the latter a disease that no longer exists. An
analysis by the anti-extremism think tank Institute for Strategic Dialogue found 1.5 million
tweets referencing the “great replacement” theory from 2013 to 2019.

But the fear of replacement, according to sociologist Kathleen Blee, dates at least to the Jim
Crow era, when white plantation owners in the South feared being outnumbered by freed slaves
and Northerners who moved south after the Civil War.35 The erection of hundreds of
Confederate monuments, especially in the 1910s and the 1960s, coincided with the election of
blacks to public office, as well as the suffragist and civil rights movements, and was meant to
uphold the racial, class, and gender hierarchies of the white elite in the public sphere.

There are, for example, hundreds of busts, monuments, and statues of Jefferson Davis,
president of the Confederate States, in parks, schools, museums, and civic sites across the South.
In the 1910s and 1920s, the United Daughters of the Confederacy planned the Jefferson Davis
Memorial Highway as a transcontinental highway that began in Arlington, Virginia, and ended in
San Diego, California. Though it may never have existed in the form originally intended, the
most famous part of the highway today is that portion of U.S. 80 that runs from Selma to
Montgomery, Alabama, where Martin Luther King, Jr., led the voting rights march in 1965.

Montgomery, the first capital of the Confederacy, is home to fifty-nine monuments, markers,
and memorials to the Confederacy, including Jefferson Davis’s home, known as the “First White
House of the Confederacy,” which celebrates his life as a “great American patriot” while making
no mention of slavery as a cause of the Civil War in the historical presentation of the house.
Davis is further lionized by a statue that sits in front of the Alabama State Capitol in
Montgomery—once the most active southern port in slave trading—overlooking the city’s main
thoroughfare and the city itself from its perch on the capitol hill, like a revered founding father
regally embodying the white supremacist values of the former Confederacy.

White supremacists who challenge the premise of equal rights for racial, ethnic, and gendered
identities and coalesce into white nationalist movements are described by two international
studies scholars as the New Right—“the latest iteration of a reactionary challenge to Liberal
belief in human universality by those that believe in fundamentally ‘natural’ inequalities.”36 This
has important implications for international relations. The New Right—including Trump
and Putin—envisions the dismantling of multilateral norms and institutions and their
restructuring in favor of national competition grounded in the strength of birth-cultural identity,
which attributes inherent natural qualities based on birth. This “Reactionary Internationalism”
focuses on the drive for sovereignty first, deploys anti-immigration approaches, and seeks to
negotiate bilateral agreements with other countries based on strength and threats to get the best
“deal.” It replaces liberal assumptions about universal humanity with the promotion of inequality
among identities and the belief that the “natural” qualities of birth cultures must be “liberated”
from the constrictions of liberal internationalist norms.37

We have seen this enacted as part of Trump’s agenda in relation to a variety of international
treaties and institutions, such as Trump’s withdrawal from the Iran nuclear agreement and the
Paris climate change accords. We also must understand Trump’s “fake news” dismissal of press
criticism and his manipulation of the Justice Department based on personal “loyalty” to him as
 premised on a fascist-inspired emphasis on the authority of the leader to the exclusion of all else.
Trump’s admiration of right-wing dictators around the world is consistent with his attempts to
bypass Congress and the Constitution to enact his agenda, whether banning Muslim and Central
American immigrants, indefinitely incarcerating children, or threatening to deport undocumented immigrants living in the U.S. and awaiting hearings. Fanatical devotion to the “leader” may be seen at Trump rallies, such as the Greenville, North Carolina, rally where Trump attacked Ilhan Omar, defining her as an outsider who doesn’t belong, causing thousands of his supporters to chant “Send her back,” just as they chanted “Lock her up” in the campaign against Hillary Clinton.

Trump considers anything negative about him to be “fake news,” but the promulgation of real “fake news”—deliberate misinformation and lies—has in fact been perpetrated not by Trump’s critics but by Trump himself and his supporters. According to numerous media outlets, including the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, as of January 2020, Trump had made more than 16,000 demonstrably false or misleading claims since assuming office. These include claims about the economy, trade agreements, the size of his inauguration crowd, jobs, unemployment, the wall on the southern border, criminal activity by some of his campaign advisers, his impeachment for extorting a foreign government for help in his own reelection, and, not least, claims about immigrants.

Though vulnerable, immigrants are not just victims but also a vital component of a multiracial working class in the U.S., often forced into the most dangerous and exploitative jobs. Some unions have declared themselves “sanctuary unions,” offering legal advice and writing certain protections into contracts, such as prohibiting employer retaliation based on immigration status.38 In a world of ever-growing numbers of refugees from persecution, war, and famine, the right to have rights by those who are rightless will not be permanently achieved within a capitalist framework, but only through transformative social struggle that eliminates privatization and the reign of corporate power to create a just society for all. In the meantime, unions must go further and organize a class struggle defense of immigrant rights, including the right to full American citizenship for anyone who makes it to this country.

**Notes**


3. Ibid, 10.

4. The video may be seen at www.youtube.com/watch?v=2EY1fpo0DRc.


16. The University of Chicago Law School International Human Rights Clinic, ACLU Border Litigation Project (San Diego and Imperial Counties), and ACLU Border Rights, “Neglect and Abuse of Unaccompanied Immigrant Children by U.S. Customs and Border Protection,” May 2018. For summary and link to full report, see https://www.aclusandiego.org/.

17. Ibid.

18. As of March 2020, there is great concern among health officials and others that the already overcrowded and unhealthy conditions of the federal immigration detention system will become a disastrous COVID-19 pandemic breeding ground.


21. On September 9, 2019, a federal judge instated a nationwide injunction preventing implementation of the new policy, which put the fate of the policy in the hands of the Supreme Court.


23. The Trump administration’s attempt to end DACA was met with a slew of lawsuits that effectively blocked it, but some lawsuits are still working their way through the courts.


27. The letter was initiated by Andrea Orzoff, associate professor of history and honors at New Mexico State University, and Anika Walke, associate professor of history at Washington University in St. Louis, and was covered in major media outlets, including the New York Review of Books, www.nybooks.com. Full disclosure: I was a signatory to this letter.


29. See www.facebook.com/anika.walke/posts/2127179610744506


37. Ibid.