# RELIGION & ENVIRONMENTALLY-INDUCED DISPLACEMENT

E-Forum 2024

# Border Religion and the Force of Belief: Dispatches from Migrant Detention

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"Don't come here." – Vice President Kamala Harris, speaking to Central Americans from Guatemala.

"I want the world to know that migrants are:
Hope for our families,
Hope for our countries,
Hope for better societies,
Hope for a better world,
We are hope that doesn't stop shining,
We are the light that won't go out,
We are strong in our journey and in our lives,
We are not what President Trump believes we are."
– a letter from a migrant in Otay Mesa Detention Center,
California 2018

# Introduction

On any given day in 2023, there were approximately 30,000 individuals detained in the 200 migrant detention centers throughout the United States. While the US has a long history of detaining non-citizens, mandatory migrant detention in the United States was authorized by President Bill Clinton (1993-2001) in 1996 through a series of immigration policy reforms, most importantly The Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act and the Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act.[1] The Clinton administration implemented these restrictions on the movement of bodies across borders after having signed the North American Free Trade Agreement in 1994 that ostensibly guaranteed free movement of capital and commodities. Since the establishment of the first private, for-profit prison company, the Corrections Corporation of America (CCA – later to become CoreCivic) in 1983, and later GEO Group in 1984, followed by the sweeping reforms of the 1990s, the number of detained migrants in the United States has steadily climbed,[2] and the number of for-profit detention centers has proliferated, making migrant detention an ineffective deterrent to migration but a lucrative business. Around $4 billion USD are generated per year from the for-profit prison industry, uniting specific constellations of nationalism, racism, and capitalism (Eisen 2018). In 2002, 198,307 individuals were held in Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) or Border Patrol facilities throughout the year (Marshall Project, 2019). In 2019 that number had grown to 486,190 per year, and in 2021, 90% of migrants detained were held in privately run detention facilities (Freedom for Immigrants, 2021).

In 2022, for the first time the U.S. Customs and Border Patrol reported close to 3 million (2,766,582) arrests on the U.S.-Mexico border, and in the course of 2023, 3.2 million individuals were "encountered" by CBP, according to the conservative think tank, America First Policy Institute (Law, 2023). According to the American Immigration Lawyers Association, at the beginning of the Biden administration, the average daily population of detained migrants was around 15,000. By August 2023, that number has doubled to over 30,000 (TRAC Immigration Project) and in September of the same year, over 200,000 individuals were under Alternative to Detention Protocols (ADPs).[3] The average amount of time a migrant might spend in detention is roughly 30 days, although this time varies widely by individual and their case.

[1] For comprehensive surveys of immigrant detention in the United States see, among others: Young 2021, Briggs 2020, Goodman 2020, García Hernández 2019, Lindskoog 2018, Loyd and Mountz 2018.

[2] Historian of migrant detention, Elliott Young, is one of a cohort of historians who emphasize that the militarization of U.S. borders reflects an enduring arc of expansion of the edges of the security state that increasingly push into neighbouring territories (see Karibo and Díaz 2020; Briggs 2020; Loyd and Mountz 2018). Young in particular questions the idea that migrant detention has steadily increased since the 1990s, arguing that "mass immigrant incarceration was as prevalent in the early twentieth century as it is in the twenty-first century," (Young 2021, 7). To arrive at the numbers and data to support his claim, Young conducts a carefully researched archival study of the history of non-citizen arrest, detention, and deportation, including data on individuals detained in psychiatric asylums and other charitable institutions. I rely on the statistical numbers of detained migrants as tracked by Syracuse University's Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse project (TRAC) as well as ICE, which demonstrate a marked uptick in the numbers of migrants detained since the passing of the 1996 laws and the entrance to the era of mass deportation.

[3] These protocols are surveillance mechanisms that include remotely tracked ankle cuffs, mandatory meetings with ICE parole officers, virtual check-ins, and GPS tracking through phone apps, and others. For more see Ordaz 2020.

Those individuals in cases fighting deportation are often held in prisons for much longer, with some languishing in detention for years, under the proviso of the plenary power doctrine that provides constitutional coverage for holding individuals in detention for indefinite time without criminal conviction or possibility of bail hearings.[4] According to the Syracuse University's TRAC-Immigration project, based on accessing governmental records on immigration statistics through the Freedom of Information Act, over 60% of migrants held in detention have no criminal record, and many more have minor offenses and traffic violations.

This essay considers the terrain of incarceration and nationalism of the borderlands in rapprochement with the discursive practices of migrants caught within its confines. Specifically, the essay explores the religious speech acts revealed in letters from migrant detention that can be read as a subversion of hegemonic fictions of the border and the systems of belief that uphold them. Sociologists, anthropologists, historians, and political theorists have carefully documented and researched the U.S. migrant detention system (Dow 2005; Borjas 2007; De Genova and Peutz, 2010; Zilberg 2011; Molina 2014; Conlon and Hiemstra 2017; Bortherton and Kretsedemas 2018). Studies have focused on family separation and detention of minors (Terrio 2015; Briggs 2020; Schrag 2020) while others have detailed the histories of Customs and Border Patrol and the expansion of Immigration and Customs Enforcement, imbricated with constructions of racialized notions of security, borders, and nationhood (Hernández 2010; De Leon 2015). Fewer studies have treated the religious dimensions that emerge in unique formations on the borderlands. Within this literature, some studies have provided a sociological focus on the shifts in religious landscapes of migration to the United States and diaspora (Haddad, Smith, and Esposito 2004; Alba, Raboteau, and DeWind 2008; Mooney 2009; Odgers-Ortiz 2014) while others have emphasized religiously motivated activism around issues of immigration (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2008; Yukich 2013).

These studies have focused on analyses of the religion of migrants, and the religious motivations of those who work for "migrant justice", often treating religion as a sui generis category that pre-exists the structures of power that shape social and political worlds. This type of study, while important, misses the competing structures of belief that naturalize the systems of faith that uphold the very logic of borders, white supremacist and racial capitalist practices of for-profit incarceration, the possibility of deeming a human being "illegal," and the border as divinely sanctioned. Few studies have documented the very religious, moral worlds embedded within the disputed spaces of migrant detention, The moral (no less theological) logics of the security state, produced and curated in ways that

[4] Also known as the Chines Exclusion Case, the Chae Chan Ping v. United States case of 1888 established that the federal government possesses authority to control migration and forecloses most direct constitutional challenges against congressional immigration statutes. The doctrine has been used to trump rights claims, although is a source of vibrant legal debate. See Martin 2015.

maintain the tripartite relationship between capitalism, imperialism, and white supremacy are brightly legible through the lens of border imperialism and the religious worlds that maintain it, while the discourses of hope, abundance, and political agency of migrants dislocate and re-locate ideas of hegemonic sovereignty through religious topographies.

This paper bridges the analytical gap through foregrounding the voices of detained migrants as they are related through a collection of letters, written from the Otay Mesa Detention Center in southern San Diego County between 2018 and 2020. In particular, this essay focuses on the religious discourses and material practices that are made manifest in the act of letter writing from a locus of imprisonment (Das 2007). The letters reveal countless religious speech-acts (Latour 2001; Austin 1962), utterances of belief, blessing, and lament; the letters are prayers for relief and deliverance as well as political acts of truth-making and a route towards collective memory. Following Veena Das, I do not aim to make visible the trauma of migrants writing from detention centers, nor attempt to make "knowable" their lives in the way some excellent ethnographies and investigations of migrant journeys have (Das 2007; Vogt 2018; Madhavi 2016; Berg 2015). Rather, my reflection on the letters leads me to ask how discourses of imprisonment and religious articulations therein, through and by their ordinariness, generate processes of subversion of state sovereignty and foment a degree of grace to disrupt the violence of borders. I draw inspiration from the work of Valentina Napolitana, Nimrod Luz, and Nurit Stadler who produced a special forum in the journal Religion and Society focused on religion and the borderlands (2015). They argue for considering the border as a contested religious space, where "religiosity is materialized through fences and militarized spiritualities," (2015, 94) but also offer the possibility that the myth of the state (Kantorowizc 2016) and the life-worlds that emerge and are forced into existence in this context can produce counter-hegemonic discourses that unsettle and interrupt the prevailing forces of belief that sustain what I am calling Border Religion.[5]

I understand Border Religion as the constellation of practices, beliefs, and discourses that sacralize the patria, the confluence of identity with the divine fiction of nationhood, and the militarized spirituality that sustains concepts of territorially bound security and racialized legality. Border Religion routes down the dividing line of who is allowed "in" and who must be kept "out" of the arbitrary political vectors drawn in the sand, made real with barbed wire, walls, and a complex military apparatus that spatially partitions territory and people. In response, the migrant letters present a countervailing discourse that disrupts and subverts Border Religion, and the 'territorialist imperative' to assume the fixedness and naturalized lines of distinction. Where Border Religion relies on logics of scarcity, migrant

[5] This approach of course drinks deeply from the rich well of critique found in Chicanx literature and the broad field of critical border studies. See, among others, the foundational work of Gloria Anzaldúa (1981), Robart Alvarez (1995), Josue Cisneros (2014), Parker and Vaughan-Williams (2014), Heyman (1994).

discourse and practice relies on proposals of abundance and re-distribution. Where Border Religion traffics in fear and foregrounds security, migrant discourse emphasizes shared humanity and refuge. Where Border Religion assumes territorial limits, migrant discourse enacts deep transnationality and flow. In the pleas for amnesty, asylum, and well-being, the letters offer fragments and glimpses of the condition of life in the borderlands. Because the borderland is not (only) a place. It is a condition of living (Napolitana, Luz, Stadler, 94).

The project is organized around the analysis of a selection from 2500 letters that the grassroots collective Allies to End Detention, based in San Diego, received from migrants in detention on the U.S.-Mexico border. Through an exploration of the collection of letters, this essay traces speech and illocutionary acts constructed through and by the systems of belief that articulate a specific kind of political practice through “religious terrain that defies dispossessing histories and unequal citizenship,” (Napolitana, Luz, Stadler, 92). In juxtaposition to the letters, this essay also considers the historical and discursive processes that uphold and defend (im)migrant detention and a white-supremacist immigration system. Through this parallel analysis, the study reveals the structural borders that must also be dismantled for physical borders to be rethought and for further inroads towards immigration justice to be possible. In other words, the theoretical scaffolding of this project is organized through the dialectical relationship between the social practices of believing and the forces of power and material effects that these practices generate, towards both horizons of liberation and further confinement. To do so, the essay relies on both an archival method of analyzing the material evidence of the letters while at the same time traces ideas of divine authority and sovereignty that inform policy and practice of border control.

First, the essay explores the religious speech acts articulated through letters as they relate precarious journeys of forced and/or undocumented migration through the Americas. Letter-writers from detention describe their journeys as journeys of faith, or even pilgrimage, while also describing tortuous experiences. Simultaneously, long-standing systems of belief uphold the racial logics of borders, their necessity, and even their divine intention. Secondly, in many of the letters from detention the writers elucidate complex ideas of the “American Dream” and often describe an aspirational Christian/Protestant urge to “work hard”, thereby rendering themselves morally justified. Here I consider the embodied act of writing a letter from spaces of confinement. Here we also see ways the civil religion that drives this “promise of America” is shaped by white nationalist conditions that have deep historical, patriarchal, and Christian roots, and stymie the very promise of prosperity that sustains such “American Exceptionalism.” Third, the essay foregrounds the ways believing practices support survival in detention just as competing beliefs from a position of patriarchal-Christian supremacy promote

violence in detention centers, and the importance of ‘security’ and ‘punishment’ as divinely ordained strategies of power. Finally, the structures of belief that insist a different immigration system is possible, indeed, that the very idea of borders should be abolished, are where this project hopes to land to further contribute to the conversation on ways to confront the structures that deny liberation and dignity for all.

Religion, like migration must be thought of transnationally. By “transnational” here I evoke the work of feminist, Indigenous and transnational scholars who urge scholarly and activist approaches to thinking “religion” as concept and who insist that scholarly work connects the dots of colonial and imperial power when tracing movements and moments of intersubjectivity, especially with regard to experiences of (forced) human mobility and the religious imaginaries embedded therein (Beliso-De Jesús 2018). Intersubjective because I understand religion as embedded and contributing to the cultural, social and political realms of both migration and environmental concern as these are equally imbricated as coeval dimensions of the study of (forced) human mobility/displacement; its causes, its barriers, and its potentials (Csordas 2009). Letter writing, and elocution of speech acts, are relational endeavours and assume encounter. I understand these moments as nodes of encounter that reflect ongoing and permanent entanglements between how particular communities and individuals negotiate meaning and “the good life” in relation to globalizing forces of hegemonic capitalist power, how religious practice and discourse inflects future imaginaries and great difference within communities, and the social worlds that shape connections and disruptions between belief, territory, and mobility.

# Background: The Letters

Y La inseguridad... muchos traemos Sueños Pero a
nosotros Los migrantes nos tratan Como delincuentes
desde que Pones un Pie en este País Los Verdaderos
delincuentes estan libres y nosotros detenidos.
Cuando te niegan una Fianza es dificil apelar aqui
en este Centro tu te enfermas no duermes bien no Comes
bien!!! Cuando solo encuentras umillación en este País lo
Unico que uno desea es Regresar a su País aunque sabes
que alla Puedes morir a mi me separón de mi hijo

*"…Many of us bring dreams, but we migrants are treated like delinquents. From the time we set foot in this country. The real delinquents are free and we are detained. When your parole is denied, it's difficult to appeal. In this place you get sick, you can't sleep, you don't eat well!!! When all you find is humiliation in this country, the only thing you want is to return to your country, even though you know that there you could die. They separated me from my son…"* – Letter writer from Honduras, 2019

Beginning in late 2017, the group Allies to End Detention (AED) formed in San Diego to facilitate letter exchange between migrants held in the Otay Mesa Detention Center in southern San Diego County, and California-based volunteers who felt they "needed to do something." It was the height of Donald Trump's xenophobic campaign against migrants, and the nation had witnessed children in cages, images of crowded migrant detention centers, and a growing awareness of the humanitarian crisis at the U.S.-Mexico border, quite literally in the backyard of the San Diego community. Liberal public opinion choked on the thought of the United States (so brazenly) imposing such cruel policies of family separation and incarceration of asylum seekers, and social media buzzed with (white) outrage that the nation had ostensibly lost its essence as a beacon of hope and "freedom" for refugees and immigrants from around the world. Refrains of "this is not who we are" echoed across the progressive United States and people were desperate to do something, anything, in the face of such overt xenophobia and racism. It was a productive moment for social movements that generated a well-spring of nascent movements made up of a broader swath of the U.S. electorate than had previously engaged in efforts at social justice.[6]

[6] This is not to overlook all the important, and long-standing efforts for migrant justice by groups that are led and made up of BIPOC people and communities, like Movimiento Cosecha, Justicia Migrante, the Black Alliance for Just Immigration, Mijente, Alliance for African Assistance, Border Angels, Otay Mesa Detention Resistance, the California Collaborative for Immigrant Justice, and others.

Black, feminist, queer, and Indigenous scholars and activists have detailed their frustration at white awakening to a world that has perpetually defined non-white, non-male experience in the country (Beliso de-Jesús 2018). Racism and white supremacy had become so deeply entrenched that many new white advocates were unaware of how their ignorance of systemic colonial and racist violence demonstrated just how present these structures are, and always have been, in the United States.

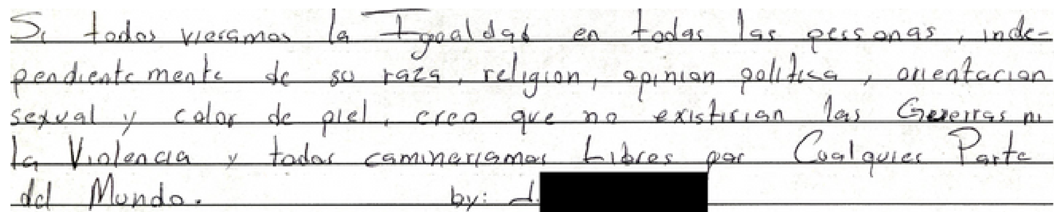
Trump's vulgarity, perhaps, made the issues real in a way that offended the liberal sensibilities of thousands of citizens in a way "traditional" political leadership had diplomatically skirted around. Many new advocates and activists found they could not stomach Trump's discourse around migrants (like the infamous speech launching Trump's 2015 bid for the presidency in which he called Mexican migrants "rapists, murderers, and bad hombres"). Others felt moved by their faith to respond to what was an increasingly explicit approach towards undiluted fascist nationalism. Allies to End Detention was made up of such well-meaning citizens as well as seasoned activists.

The group decided on writing letters to migrants in detention after someone posted 40 names and alien numbers on Facebook of individuals who had been detained by ICE. If abolishing ICE was still out of reach, at the very least, the group reckoned, they could let people inside migration prisons know that i) not all United Statesians were like Donald Trump or agreed with his policies, ii) people in the United States recognized the humanity of migrants and, iii) were dedicated to amplifying their voices in the public sphere to document the abuses that were occurring and to heighten public awareness around migrant detention. Furthermore, the nostalgia of physically writing a letter combined with the affordance of physically "doing something" was attractive to burgeoning activists and veteran advocates alike.

I was also a volunteer letter-writer and participated in the activist and advocacy work of AED during that time. I recognize my own complicity in the deeply embedded systems of privilege afforded to white, cis-gendered, educated, North Americans, and my critiques of performative allyship and misplaced intentions emerge from a deep concern for peace and justice on the border and the possibility of imagining a world in which no one is illegal. This essay is a partial response to this deep concern, and I am fortunate to have been given access to the digital archive of letters. Now, along with a small group of researchers, we have access to the letters that are redacted, and work is continuing to code their information. This process has generated a vibrant archive of testimonies, documenting narratives of resilience and despair. The letters describe violence and desperate situations in countries of origin that forced entire families to flee as well as harrowing stories of migration journeys to the United States from around the world, but primarily Central America and Mexico. The letters also detail the religious imaginaries that frame faith in aspirational

futures, like immigration reform or freedom from incarceration. The letter writers, both inside the detention center and those comfortably settled in middle-class California, embody contradictory practices that at once attempt to bridge a gap between detained and free, while the bureaucratic procedures (like tracked Alien Numbers and redacted names) and material remnants (like the receipts for donations of commissary) of the letter writing archive simultaneously re-inscribe the insurmountable distances—racial, physical, class-based, and religious— that remained between the letter writers. This essay focuses only on the letters from inside the detention center.

I understand the letters not only as a specific form of evidence, but as *testimonios*[7] of faith, hope, anger, frustration, devastation, and disillusionment with the empty promises of the American Dream – the letters articulate religious speech-acts, a defiant kind of utterance of God at the border that is shadowed by the religious worlds embedded in convictions of enclosure, incarceration, and secure borders.

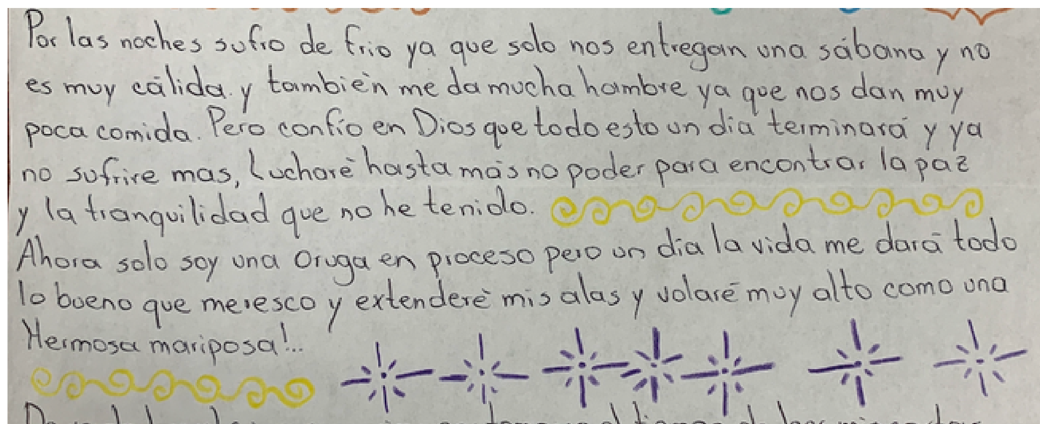

Si todos viesemos la Igualdad en todas las personas, inde-
pendientemente de su raza, religion, opinion politica, orientacion
sexual y color de piel, creo que no existirian las Guerras ni
la Violencia y todos caminariamos Libres por Cualquier Parte
del Mundo. by: d

*"If we all saw equality among all people, independent of their race, religion, political opinion, sexual orientation, skin colour, we wouldn't have wars of violence and we would all be free to walk in any part of the world."* – letter writer from Guatemala.

# Believing as social practice; believing as world-making

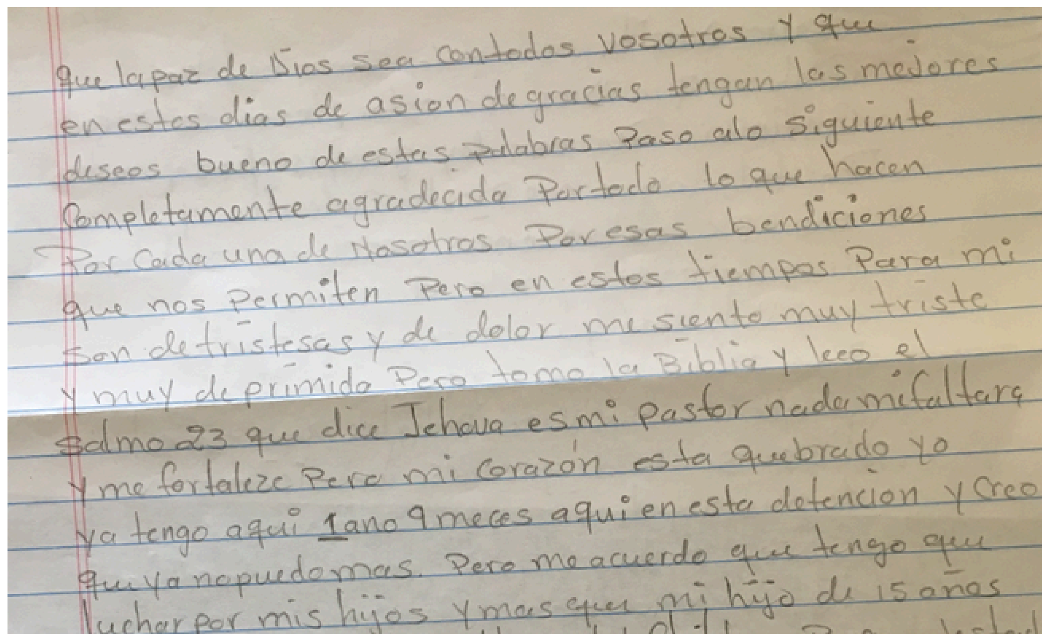
The violence deployed through migrant detention is indicative of a specific form of U.S. imperialism and colonialism that has ordered the development of the nation from the machinations of the systems of slavery that built the country to the migrants who, today, are the disposable yet fundamental cogs in the economic wheels that keep U.S. economies functioning (Izcara Palacios 2019). The threat to existence of black and brown bodies in the streets of the United States is endemic to the fabric of the nation (Davis 1983; Smith-Rosenberg 2012; Kendi and Blain 2022; Wilkerson 2023). The dominant forces of white supremacy in the everyday social, cultural, political, and economic functions of the country are a constant threat to the non-white majority of individuals who live in the nation.  Many of the migrant letters describe belief as part of a struggle for survival, but also as part of an aspirational urge towards the "American Dream". At the same time, belief informs practices

of political action and other social practice. As I outline later in the paper, practices of belief also sustain systems of racial capitalism and border imperialism that impede comprehensive immigration reform.


Por las noches sufio de frio ya que solo nos entregan una sábana y no
es muy cálida. y tambièn me da mucha hambre ya que nos dan muy
poca comida. Pero confío en Dios que todo esto un día terminará y ya
no sufrire mas, Lucharè hasta màs no poder para encontrar la paz
y la tranquilidad que no he tenido.
Ahora solo soy una Oruga en proceso pero un día la vida me dará todo
lo bueno que meresco y extenderè mis alas y volaré muy alto como una
Hermosa mariposa!..

*At night I'm cold because they only give us a sheet and isn't warm, and I'm also really hungry since they give us very little food. But I trust in God that all of this, one day, will end and I won't suffer anymore. I will fight until I cannot anymore in order to find the peace and tranquility that I haven't had. At the moment I'm just a caterpillar in process, but one day life will give me all the good that I deserve and I will spread my wings and fly so high like a beautiful butterfly!"* – letter writer from El Salvador.

I suggest that we consider believing to be a social, as well as political act. For example, for many migrants, believing is the very political act of refusal; of colonial and violent histories, supported by the tiers of economic and political power, to deny the possibility of a different life—a better life, a peaceful life, a life without fear.


que lapaz de Dios sea contodos vosotros y que
en estos dias de asion degracias tengan las mejores
deseos bueno de estas palabras Paso alo siguiente
Completamente agradecida Portodo lo que hacen
Por Cada una de Nosotros Por esas bendiciones
que nos Permiten Pero en estos tiempos Para mi
son de tristesas y de dolor me siento muy triste
y muy de primido Pero tomo la Biblia y leeo el
Salmo 23 que dice Jehova es mi pastor nada mifaltara
y me fortaleze Pero mi corazon esta quebrado yo
ya tengo aqui 1ano 9 meces aqui en esta detencion y creo
que ya nopuedomas. Pero me acuerdo que tengo que
luchar por mis hijos y mas que mi hijo de 15 años

*“May the peace of God be with all of you and may in these days of Thanksgiving have best wishes. Well, from these words I move to the next, I am completely thankful for everything that you have done for all of us, for these blessings that you allow us. But these times, for me are of sadness and pain. I feel very sad and very depressed. But I take my Bible, I read the 23rd Psalm that says Jehova is my shepherd, I will want to nothing, and He strengthens me. But my heart is broken. I have been here for one year and 9 months in this prison, and I think I can’t anymore. But I remember that I must fight for my children, above all for my 15 year old son…”*

People believe because, sometimes, there is no alternative. Going into debt, sacrificing everything to the bank to pay a coyote for passage to the border, risking life and limb to traverse the hostile terrain of the corridors of global migration throughout the Americas northward, these are some examples of the practices that are discussed in the letters that are rooted in the social practice of believing.

I consider “religion” as a concept and lean on the Anthropology of Religion to consider religion, in part, as dialogical tradition that works in concert with other forces of power that make up our social and political worlds (Asad 1993; Robbins 2007; Garriott and O’Neill 2008; Marshall 2014). In the case of the letters from the migrants, many hundreds of letters invoke religious language of “Dios les bendiga,” (God bless you), or “Si Dios quiere,” (God-willing) and other “ordinary” commentary that I invite us to understand as acts of writing or speech-acts that invoke a closing of distance between themselves (imprisoned) and freedom (salvation). Writing a letter is “doing an action” (Austin 1956). To write is to act, and to act is to have agency in its most essential form, the ordinary and the mundane, no matter if that mundanity is within the containment of a prison. Words are not arbitrary, J.L. Austin

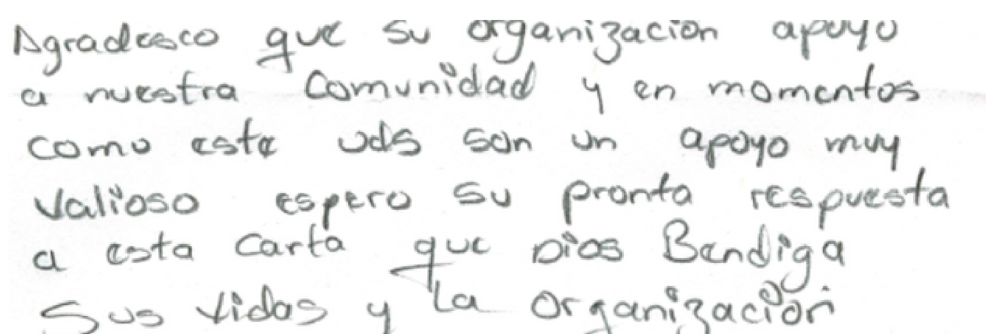
told us many years ago. Words do things, they are action, especially when we write them down. The ordinariness of the words “God Bless You” performs an act of grace and subversion. “I am not a criminal” does the same, if at an interior level. But a word written is a word to be read and witnessed. Writing is relational and ties the reader into a web of accountability, easily destroyed if the reader negates her responsibility, but revelatory if the reader recognizes her entanglement with both the writer, and the forces the writer speaks against.

A letter writer from Cameroon says: “I am happy to hear back from you, I highly appreciate your concern toward broken heart [sic] people who are going through a lot in detention like me. Every morning I get up with greater sorrow and nerve pain only hoping and putting my trust in God Almighty, just hope He rescues me one day.”

A writer from Honduras comments, “Estoy seguro que Dios trabaja por medio de personas como Ustedes y como tu./ I’m sure God works through people like you.”

And a letter writer from Mexico writes: “Primero le daré gracias a Jehová mi Dios porqué Él pone gente buena en todas partes para ayudar a quienes nos encontramos en situaciones muy adversas, tristes, y de mucha desperación./First I want to give thanks to Jehova my God because he puts good people in all places to help those of us who are in adverse, sad, and desperate situations.”

Other letters express ordinary language alongside more extra-ordinary testimony:
Excerpt from letter #1, example of “religious speech”:


Agradesco que su organización apoyo
a nuestra Comunidad y en momentos
como esta uds son un apoyo muy
valioso espero su pronta respuesta
a esta carta que Dios Bendiga
Sus vidas y la Organización

*“I am thankful to your organization, supporting our community, and in moments like these, you all are an important support. I hope you reply to this letter soon, may God bless your lives and your organization.”*

Excerpt from letter #2:

No tengo familia aquí y me
encuentro, Sola, me gusta escribir
leer, tengo una Biblia hermosa,
y Por ahora Dios es mi unico,
Apoyo, yo estaba en San francisco,
en otra detención de I,C,e, tengo
una orden de deportación, y estoy
esperando una U visa, no Se cuanto,
tiempo mas vaya ha esperar,

*"I have no family here, and I am alone. I like to write, read, I have a beautiful Bible, and right now God is my only support. I was in San Francisco, in another ICE detention center, and I have an order for deportation, but I'm waiting for a visa. I don't know how much longer I'll need to wait…"*

Excerpt from letter #3:

Hola Buenas tardes les Saludo y les deseo toda
La Bendición de el Señor..

*"Hello, good afternoon, I greet you and I wish for you all the blessings of the Lord."*

Excerpt from letter #4:

no e podido dormir pensando como aser si no
tengo a nadie que me Recivo aquí ni quien me
ayuden pero tengo la fe que toda saldra Conforme
ala Volunta de Dios. Les agradesco a todos

*"I haven't been able to sleep thinking about what to do, if I don't have anyone who will sponsor me here, or anyone that will help me, but I have faith that everything will result according to God's will. I thank you all…"*

From these excerpts we observe that religious imaginaries allow migrants who are systematically dehumanized, to find and cultivate threads of humanity to survive experiences like prolonged detention in for-profit prison facilities. However, I want to be clear that I do not interpret religious imaginaries in some sort of causal relationship with suffering – I do not think that religion operates simply as a crutch for survival. From the letters what becomes clear is that religion, and religious imaginaries, do not simply operate as a false neoliberal consciousness or a trap for the naïve. Believing, I insist, forms a set of social actions, habits of thought and expression. Relating practices of believing with the practice of writing clears an analytical space for understanding the social and cultural relationships between political and religious practice. For, if “believing is about contradictions maintained, not truths affirmed” as Catherine Bell first suggested, the inherent contradictions in the capitalist carceral system (Wang 2018), and the ways in which this system has been implemented into the context of the borderlands through violence and corruption, believing becomes a powerful process of holding contradicting realities in tension (O’Neill 2012, p.301).

Belief is a slippery category that has fascinated and frustrated the scholar of religion since Durkheim claimed that, “religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is, things that are set apart and forbidden” (Durkheim 1912, p. 62).[8] Yet, as Catherine  Bell aptly pointed out, while religious practices have been a focus for the study of religion, belief has not been the subject of significant scholarly attention in the field. This is ironic, she notes, because “Although it is ignored in all formal senses, the field makes nearly constant reference to the idea of belief in nearly every publication” (Bell 2008, p. 88). Overlooked in the field of religious studies, the “problem of belief” has nevertheless been addressed in various other disciplines, such as anthropology (Evans-Pritchard 1965;  Needham 1972; Engelke 2002; Lindquist and Coleman 2008), philosophy (Hume 1992; Wittgenstein Davidson 1984; Žižek 2001), cognitive theory (Atran and Norenzayan 2004; Barrett 2000, 2004; Willard and Norenzayan 2013), and extensively in theological studies (Hillar 2012; Frank 1981; Collins 2010). Bell assigns blame for the oversight in religious

[8] It should be noted that belief as central to “religion” was a trope employed long before Durkheim. The literature is thick. Evolutionary anthropologists of the Victorian era defined beliefs as central to rituals, indeed, as central to religion itself. As Talal Asad deftly explains, the trope of “beliefs” as central to religion relies on an exclusively “Christian” historical narrative that has problematically, and Eurocentrically, imposed “the problem of belief” onto all scholarship of religion. Asad’s critique is most famously found in his dismantling of Clifford Geertz’ definition of religion as cultural system, found in Asad 2003. Asad further teases out his critique in Asad 2012.Manuel A. Vásquez (2011) carefully treats the legacy of immateriality in the study of religion, and the role that the discipline’s concern with “belief” has played. Vásquez calls for a “materialist theory of religion” through moving past the colonial inheritance of religion being considered equivalent to belief. Robert Orsi offers a discussion of the problems with “religion-as-belief” from his perspective from the conceptual frame of lived religion. The article, “Belief” in Material Religion 7(1) reviews the history of the term belief, the colonial legacies that a Christo-centric worldview imposed upon different religions around the world. Orsi indeed warns that the overwhelming dismissal of belief, for a focus on the body and materiality, has only served to place the debate back at the problematic risk that empties the minds of “ordinary religious people” and does not allow for a s consideration of the “inevitably relational nature of these operations of mind and body in religious contexts” (15). The debate has most recently been taken up by Kathryn Lofton and the Department of Religious Studies at Yale University in 2012. The Yale Roundtable on Belief is documented in Lofton (2012) in which she concludes that while belief remains a theme of interest in the discipline, it cannot be detached from the “strange social politics of its invocation” (p. 54).

studies to the “routine reliance on [belief]’s nebulous status passing back and forth raw datum and theoretical tool” (Bell 2008, p. 89).[9]

This tacking back and forth has maintained a tendency towards sidestepping belief as a category of inquiry in itself. Assumed, yet without theoretical foundation, the study of religion preserves the distinction between internal “beliefs” and outward “rites” collective and coherent ritual acts that represent what “those people believe” and how distinctions between the sacred and the profane are maintained (Durkheim 1912; Eliade 1959; Smith 1978). This tendency has resulted in “a scholarly imagination interested in meaningful differences rather than hierarchical interconnections” (O’Neill 2013, p.1095). The bright distinctions drawn between belief and practice precludes the study of complex entanglements between believing and practice, hierarchical interconnections of power and discipline, and Christianity and border imperialism. In this vein, the argument follows Bell’s suggestion that rather than belief, the scholar of religion should consider believing, as verb and as social practice.

Believing, for the many hundreds who write of it, is the riskiest move, the most agentive practice. For there are few other choices. The politics of believing are precisely the transgressive practices that these individuals have open to them. Believing that the future can be different, that something beyond the discipline of violence is possible, is a political act.[1]Bruno Latour takes the idea of belief one step further. “Belief,” says Latour, “is conceived as a vehicle for access to something through transformation,” (Latour 2001, 231). Latour goes on to say, “Religious talk…cannot be about anything other than what is present. It is about the present, not the past or the future,” (232). The believability of belief, then, operates as action that cuts all ways. The migrant letters and the religious talk therein conjure a presence that defies the absence of freedom or justice.

From the experiences of the migrants, and what they tell us about how they are treated in detention we can also conclude that white supremacy operates as a force of power that makes up social and political worlds and encourages the slow death of culture and identity

[[9]The insistence on distinguishing between “belief” and “practice” as distinct conceptual arenas can also be traced back to the materialist turn in the study of religion, and the welcome emphasis on the body, on embodiment, and subjectivity, as Constance M. Furey (2012) outlines in her provocative article, “Bodies, Society, and Subjectivity in Religious Studies.”. As Furey helpfully explains, the turn to the body and materiality has upset the Protestant bias towards the “religion as belief” concept. She warns, however, that the new focus has maintained the religious subject in a world to herself. Furey suggests moving towards emphasizing the relationality inherent in subject formation along with the consideration of embodiment and praxis.

[1] In relation to the urge of volunteer letter-writers to try and “understand” the experience of forced migration, or migrant detention—as well as a trend in some anthropological scholarship to seek out universalizing principles of the human experience—I question such a project of relatability. I question the hubris of the privileged reader interpreting the actions and words of letter-writers within a closed epistemological frame. The distinction of geontological difference is one that I take seriously (Povinelli 2016). In foregrounding the experiences of the letter-writers with the intention of challenging epistemological assumptions of poverty, exclusion, and aspiration through close reading, I attempt to trouble easy comparison. To conclude that “there is always more” to belief, excuses the reader from her own responsibility in the structures that foreclose the potential of something better for those who have nothing left to lose. To determine for the letter-writers that their commitment to a utopia is a false consciousness that North American or European scholars of religion have revealed, is as wrong as it is intellectually colonial. To name the horizon of hope as utopic, in the sense that it is impossible, is to interpret the beliefs of millions of believers who exist at the margins of power as chimerical because these horizons seem implausible to the privileged reader. This is a further dimension of the ethnographic gap. Yet, on the other hand, to read an empowering regime of liberation into their words precludes critique at a structural and epistemological level.

that do not fit within the confines of a violently exclusionary system of being. Renewed calls for anthropologies of white supremacy resound with calls in the field of Religious Studies to directly confront the intimate imbrications between religion, race, and capitalism (McTighe 2020; Johnson 2020; Weisenfeld 2020; Goetz 2019; Bartel and Hulsether 2019; Beliso-de Jesús 2018; Hulsether 2017; Fletcher 2016; Fessenden 2009; Weisenfeld 2009). White supremacy as the "central organizing logic of the Western world," (Bonds and Inglewood 2016, 720) clearly frames the logics that uphold a carceral migration system, that is also rooted in, and sustains, a project of racial capitalism. Within the longue durée of white supremacy as the dominant organizing form of modern politics and society, the religious worlds embedded therein are of utmost importance to unravel and denaturalize as the dismantling of these systems relies on a radical recognition of the beliefs that create "whiteness" and celebrate it as a supreme ontology.

# Religion, Racial Capitalism, and Border Imperialism: Border Religion

Cedric J. Robinson, building on the work of sociologist Oliver Cox, introduces the idea that capitalism and racism evolved from structures of colonial expansion, imperialist urges, and feudalism to *together* shape a modern world system of "racial capitalism" dependent on slavery, violence, imperialism, and genocide. Robinson challenges the idea that capitalism emerged as an equalizing force in Europe, and states that "the tendency of European civilization through capitalism was thus not to homogenize, but to differentiate—to exaggerate regional, subcultural, and dialectical differences into 'racial' ones," (Robinson 1983, p. 26). In other words, Robinson takes to task an uncritical Marxist analysis for the myopic Eurocentric view of the development of capitalism, and for not accounting for race in the construction of difference through capitalist means of production and exploitation. Rather than a force towards establishing homogenizing movements and classes, like the proletariat, Robinson insists that capitalism produced further social fragmentation via the deployment of racial difference.

Jackie Wang furthers the idea of racial capitalism to present her case for a critique of "carceral capitalism" that is organized around nodes of predatory lending and parasitic forms of governance (Wang 2018). In considering the role of confinement and gratuitous violence (as two of the five organizing principles of parasitical governance that Wang presents), although Wang is focused on anti-black racism and the effects of carceral capitalism primarily on black communities in the United States, an extrapolation of these social facts can be easily transferred to make further sense of carceral migration policies and structures that are rooted in a political economy of dispossession, but also the reigning logics that the only remaining social entitlement left in a carceral capitalist State

is that of security. The “debt State” is also, necessarily, a “penal state” since, insofar as the United States government divested from social entitlements and infrastructure, it invested in prisons and police (and ICE and border patrol). In explaining the work of gratuitous violence, Wang suggests that, first, “global capitalism’s condition of possibility was black enslavement,” (Wang, 2018a, p. 1). This argument contends that the expansion of global capitalism was possible only via the trans-Atlantic slave trade and the trafficking in black bodies that made global trade profitable in a new way, setting the stage for the development of modern Europe and the United States as we know them today. Furthermore, the expansion of global capitalism depended on the logic of disposability and exploitability of black bodies. As W.E.B. Du Bois pointed out, white supremacy relied on the idea that whites could, and should, own the land and own it forever. But it also required a white lust for non-white blood (Du Bois 1940). Here, Du Bois shares with Frantz Fanon a critique of global capital, that also takes into account the psychology of unconscious racism that fueled, and continues to fuel, both expansion of profits as well as the exploitation, and disposability, of black and brown bodies (Fanon 1963). Here we see the kinds of theological underpinnings of extractivist logics in deep relation with white supremacist ideation. And this is where I locate a specific kind of Border Religion.

I suggest that this “unconscious racism” reveals a deeply embedded set of values and morals that are upheld by a specific form of imperial Christianity that has connected whiteness to nationhood and economic prosperity in the United States and sustains specific ideals that reinforce the limits of nation, and the sacralizes the necessity of borders and penal immigration policies. This is further evidenced by a consideration of Harsha Walia’s concept of “border imperialism.”

In her book, Undoing Border Imperialism, Walia begins by establishing that capitalism and colonialism/imperialism have “undermined the stability of communities and compelled people to move in search of work and survival,” (Walia 2013, 12). In considering the abolition of the migrant carceral system, in undoing border imperialism, and re-centering justice for migrants specifically, this project follows Walia’s call to conceptualize, but also collectively work against not only unjust migration policies in the United States, but the very structures that uphold a global system of apartheid that the trifecta of oppression of capitalism, imperialism, and colonialism have built in the making of the “modern world.”

Border Imperialism, according to Walia, encapsulates four imbricated “structurings”:

1. The mass displacement of impoverished and colonized communities resulting from asymmetrical relations of global power, and the simultaneous securitization of the border against those migrants whom capitalism and empire have displaced;
2. The criminalization of migration with severe punishment and discipline of those deemed “alien” or “illegal”;
3. The entrenchment of a racialized hierarchy of citizenship by arbitrating who legitimately constitutes the nation-state;
4. State-mediated exploitation of migrant labor, akin to conditions of slavery and servitude, by capitalist interests, (Walia 2013, 5).

The establishment of the nation-state, demarcated by physical borders, alongside the steady march of capitalist expansion has created a world of borders in which, as journalist Dawn Paley writes, “far from preventing violence, the border is in fact the reason it occurs,” (Walia 5). The lens of border imperialism, Walia tells us, “focuses the conversation on the systemic structuring of global displacement and migration through and collusion with capitalism, colonial empire, state building, and hierarchies of oppression,” (6). A critical consideration of these intertwined forces, or structures, furthers an historical and systemic critique of a carceral migration system designed to dehumanize and reinforce urges of global capitalism alongside the useful deployment of concepts of “nation”. As scholars Bridget Anderson, Nandita Sharma, and Cynthia Wright state, “the simultaneous process of granting more freedom of the movement of capital and less freedom to migrants is…a crucial underpinning of global capitalism and the equally global system of national states,” (Anderson, Sharma, and Wright 2009, 5). In the history of U.S. state-formation and border imperialism, the construction of race and morality in the shape of a particular Christian nationalism has co-constructed frames of comprehending the world that sustain the necessity for capitalist expansion and militarized borders. In other words, there is a Christian underpinning to border imperialism and understanding this particular matrix of power upon which beliefs in punitive immigration policies grow is vital to understanding how to confront them.

# Christianity, white supremacy, and the formation of borders

The discourses and practices that uphold Border Religion can be well assessed through a survey of recent opinion pieces in conservative think-tanks and news outlets. This evidence demonstrates broad discussion on the Biblical justifications for border walls, national sovereignty, and sacralized work of defining borders and upholding a certain form

of national security. For example, in a 2019 opinion piece, John Shelton, a policy advisor for right-wing think tank Advancing American Freedom, writes for 'Providence', a conservative Christian publication, stating he wants to "make a specifically Christian case for securing our borders: constrained by the bounds of just war thinking, securing our borders can be an instance of Christian enemy love." The article then goes on to make a somewhat convoluted theological argument about the Christian moral prerogative to uphold and even strengthen border walls and border security as a means to protect vulnerable migrants. Bryan Fischer, writing for the American Family Association, disputes former California Governor Jerry Brown's assertion that the border wall is not "Christian" and argues in a 2017 opinion column that border walls are Biblical fact, and are strategically important throughout the "Christian Scriptures". Towards the end of the piece Fischer quips, "if a wall to keep bad people out is good enough for God, it ought to be good enough for us." Cheryl Chumley, a columnist for the Washington Times and host of the podcast "Bold and Blunt" boldly states in an opinion from 2019, "The Bible is hardly a book that teaches open borders." In a 2022 guest column for the Pikes Peak Courier, Executive Director of the Truth and Liberty Coalition, Richard Harris, writes, "the Bible recognizes our inherent power to defend our borders and exercise our sovereignty." In a complex display of Christianity and violent anti-immigrant sentiment, the 2024 "Take Our Border Back" caravan that traveled along the U.S.-Mexico border through January and February held rallies and revival meetings, replete with baptisms, crosses erected, and American flags shot-through with Christian imagery. U.S. Representative Keith Self (R-TX) proclaimed at rally of the caravan in Quemado, TX, "Folks, this is serious stuff, this is evil stuff…we are in a spiritual battle for the survival of our Republic," (Hesson and Cardona, 2024).

Border religion is rooted in an historically and culturally shaped political theology that upholds boundaries and national identities as divinely established. While not unique to the United States, the particular cultural manifestation of U.S.-based Border Religion operates alongside forceful calls for a re-imagination of borderless and anti-imperial theologies rooted in borderless concepts of abundance and enough-ness. We might consider these divergent utterances of god at the border, and direct our emphasis towards the theological imperative of migrant voices calling for a cosmovision that prioritize life over defense.

The literature on race and religion in the United States is thick. In the wake of the Trump presidency and the increased media attention that white nationalist Christianity has received, there has been a veritable deluge of scholarly and popular reflection on the linkages between White supremacy, Christianity, and nationalism/anti-immigration. According to Kristen Kobes Du Mez, White Evangelicals in the United States "are more opposed to immigration reform, and have more negative views about immigrants, than

any other religious demographic," (Du Mez 2018). Du Mez links this xenophobia to a toxic brand of militant Christian masculinity, but other links can be drawn to broader historical ideas of the nation, whiteness, and connections to capitalist forms of accumulation by dispossession and perspectives on labor, especially that of migrants. While much has been written about White Evangelical support for the policies of Donald Trump, including migration policies, less attention has focused on the fact that 64% of White Catholics, and 57% of mainline white Protestants also supported Trump (Luo 2020).

Historians, also, have attended to the relationships between Christianity and the justification of slavery in the formation of the nation of the United States (Sensebach 1998; Glasson 2012; Bailey 2012), with a particular focus on Protestant and Puritan ideas about race, the body, and the soul in the establishment of a political, social, and economic framework that was ensconced within a theological discourse that produced the very idea of "race" and nation (Goetz 2012). Katharine Gerbner's book, Christian Slavery: Conversion and Race in the Protestant Atlantic World, for example, explains that Protestant Christians of the 17th and 18th centuries in the Atlantic World, from New York to Barbados, justified the enslavement of Black Christians because "race, rather than religion, was the defining feature of bondage," (Gerbner 2018, 3). Importantly, these theological and racialized logics also contributed to the construction of "whiteness" as an identifier that separated the Protestant slaveholders from their chattel, but also represented a socio-economic distinction as wealthy land and slave-owners and as morally superior. Gerbner convincingly illustrates how these intellectual and theological ideas of the 17th and 18th Centuries are intimately linked to modern problems of White Supremacy, insofar as the world continues to struggle with "the implications of the religious and racial exclusivity seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Protestants pioneered," (Goetz 2019, 765). The work of Judith Weisenfeld (2009), Edward Blum (2012), Paul Harvey (2016), and Sylvester Johnson (2017) – to name just a few – have traced how early ideas of race and religion have transformed into contemporary expressions of violent exclusion and deeply embedded structures of White Supremacy in the Western world. These studies, along with many others, bring historian Rebecca Goetz to suggest that instead of "Catholic supremacy" (in relation to the many ways Catholic Christianity, colonialism, and justifications for slavery operated in the Catholic colonial Americas) or "Protestant supremacy" as being distinct and discrete formations of religiously infused and justified racism, scholars and practitioners should understand that it is "Christian Supremacy" as it was established in the early colonial worlds of the Americas and has so deeply rooted itself in the xenophobia of today's shrinking world, and that maintains a conceptual justification for on-going border imperialism.

The risk of treating ideologies of white supremacy as a form of belief, going back to the earlier discussion around belief versus believing, in opposition to having material

consequences can produce a false sense of banality in the implications of white-supremacist white nationalism and its relation to policies of border imperialism that have real effects on human life(Baker 2017). The letters from migrants in detention peel back the veil on the innocence of belief, and reveal that the effects of belief, the believing practices that result in violent policies, need to be contended with in order to support the movements that believe a more just world, a world without violent borders that divide, a world in which all humans are recognized and free, and a world in which no one is illegal.

# Towards conclusion

This essay has considered the religious worlds embedded both in the politics of migrant speech-acts through letters written in detention and the forces that defend logics of deterrence and borders. The systems of belief that are at work in the spheres of migrant calls for justice and white nationalism are both foundational to understand in order to further work of abolition and sustainable structural change in the service of justice for migrants and those who live on the margins of power. The fields of religious studies and migration studies should heed the call from scholars like Aisha Beliso de-Jesús for a "renewed commitment towards Black feminist, queer, and transnational approaches that have shown how we cannot stop at critical analysis but must also strive towards an activist-oriented scholarship that produces decolonial transformation," (2018). The "practitioner-scholar" divide is one we can sustainably question, and critique, just as we interrogate the categories of "American-identity" building that sustain programs of imperialism, confinement, and white supremacy. What the letters from migrants in detention reveal is the reality of carceral racial capitalism and liberatory potential of taking migrant discourse seriously. The entanglements between the two harnessed together in emergent forms of practice can interrupt fictions of the borderlands and the power of belief that sustains both the myth of the border and the possibility of its subversion.

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# Religion and Environmentally-Induced Displacement in Latin America and the Caribbean

**The Center for Latin American and Latino Studies (CLALS)** at American University (AU) undertook a multi-year program of workshops, research, publication, and engagement with stakeholders, dedicated to improving understanding of the relationship between religion and environmental displacement with support by the Henry Luce Foundation's Initiative on Religion in International Affairs.

Through these projects, we seek to understand the intersections of religion with the environment, while bringing them together with our Center's ongoing attention to the sources and impacts of migration in Latin America. In so doing, we are exploring relationships between two forms of religious advocacy in the Americas, on behalf of migrants and the environment. This project seeks to better understand religion's role at each phase of environmental migration, from departure or displacement, during transit, to arrival and adaptation. It examines how different religious traditions inform individual and community responses to environmental dislocations, including Christian, but also indigenous and Afro-Latino religious beliefs and practice. This project as a whole also explores the potential of religious voices and ideas for bringing greater public attention to solving the legal challenges now faced by environmental migrants.

We focus primarily on the following interrelated dimensions of religious engagement with environmental displacement, of which all are represented throughout the E-Forum: 1. the contributions of faith-based actors and religious ideas to international and national discussions and emerging normative frameworks addressing new governance and security challenges posed by environmental migration; 2. the participation of transnational faith-based non-governmental organizations as part of humanitarian interventions on behalf of migrants; 3. the role of religion and churches in receiving communities for addressing the needs of migrants, especially regarding resettlement and societal integration; and 4. the ways religious engagement is well-positioned to ameliorate intangible and collective dimensions of environmental dislocations beyond just the material needs of individual migrants

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