

# A Roundtable on Kristina Shull, *Detention Empire: Reagan's War on Immigrants and the Seeds of Resistance*

David-James Gonzales, Hardeep Dhillon, Michelle Paranzino, Danielle Olden, Jason Colby, and Kristina Shull

## Roundtable Introduction

David-James Gonzales

The past twenty-five years have witnessed an explosion of scholarly attention on the deep and multi-faceted history of immigration restriction and migrant criminalization in the United States.<sup>1</sup> In addition to overturning popular myths and paradigms that uncritically celebrate America as a “nation of immigrants” welcoming the world’s “huddled masses,” this scholarship proves emphatically that xenophobia and exclusion are hallmarks of the nation’s immigration system. Kristina Shull’s *Detention Empire: Reagan’s War on Immigrants and the Seeds of Resistance* represents an emerging trend among im/migration scholars that interweaves the histories of restriction and exclusion with the rise of the modern carceral state.<sup>2</sup>

As Shull explains in the preface, *Detention Empire* emerged from a personal need to answer two questions: 1) what is the connection between immigrant detention and mass incarceration? and 2) why were the first federally contracted private prisons immigrant detention centers? (xiii). The search for answers to these questions led her to investigate the early years of Reagan’s presidency, a period that remains understudied by im/migration historians whose publications tend to favor US-Mexico migration and the legacy of the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986, a signature piece of comprehensive immigration reform passed during Reagan’s second term.

Examining the administration’s response to Caribbean and Central American migration resulting from its Cold War foreign policy, Shull asserts that Reagan’s first term in office has much to teach us about the proliferation of privately run immigrant detention centers in recent years. Although immigrant detention formed part of what Shull calls a “carceral palimpsest” that preexisted Reagan’s administration, it was during his tenure, she asserts, that the practice was “weaponized” into a form of counterinsurgent warfare essential to the maintenance of U.S. empire (1). Shull is equally interested in magnifying the voices of refugees, asylum-seekers, undocumented immigrants, and im/migrant rights activists who resisted and mobilized in response to “Reagan’s Cold War on immigrants.” It is their voices, she argues, that form the “seeds of resistance” that not only uncover the lies used to sustain borders, walls, and prisons but also comprise the “blueprints for building a world free from state violence” (233).

The reviewers in this roundtable applaud the interdisciplinary and ambitious scope of Shull’s project. Michelle D. Paranzino says that Shull “demonstrates the inextricability of foreign and domestic policies and helps to lay the theoretical groundwork for understanding the

causes and consequences of Reagan’s war on immigrants.” Similarly, Hardeep Dhillon writes that *Detention Empire* “presents a different version of the Cold War that is rooted in immigration history but...dovetails with US measures of federal aid and proxy wars targeted at procuring greater control in Central America and the Caribbean.” Danielle Olden identifies one of the book’s “most significant contributions [as] its insistence on and demonstration of the interconnectedness of covert warfare, immigration, and the origins of the carceral state.” And Jason Colby praises Shull’s “compelling analysis of the interplay between the rise of large-scale, repressive detention of migrants, especially in the for-profit carceral sector, and the extensive on-the-ground resistance to those policies.”

Overall, the reviewers agree that Shull largely succeeds in demonstrating the Reagan administration’s pivotal role in initiating a new era of punitive immigration policies towards Caribbean and Central American migrants fleeing the impacts of US Cold War imperialism. Further, they admire her remarkable ability to interweave stories of migrant agency and solidarity throughout the book, highlighting “the intersecting landscapes of resistance to Reagan that originated within and transcended detention sites” (11).

While *Detention Empire* has much to appreciate, the reviewers are mixed in their assessment of Shull’s use of concepts and terminology. For Paranzino, the main issue is Shull’s “overly broad” definition and use of the term “counterinsurgency,” which does not account for the different iterations of the “doctrine and practice” in “specific historical contexts.” Similarly, Colby points to Shull’s tendency to use “inaccessible” and “imprecise” language, which comes across as “rhetorical excesses.” Likewise, Dhillon invites Shull to more clearly “distinguish the methods” used to form her analysis and cautions against “ascribing intention” amidst “countless gaps and omissions” in the historical record. In response, Shull acknowledges that her use of “less accessible language” presumes readers are familiar with how scholars of US im/migration, racial empire, and mass incarceration interpret and use terms like “revanchism,” “total war,” and “counterinsurgency.”

Despite their concerns, the reviewers believe *Detention Empire* is a “must read,” a “revelation,” and an “indispensable” book that deserves “wide readership.” And I agree. While the book will be a challenge for most non-specialists, it prompts a critical re-assessment of Reagan’s so-called liberal legacy on U.S. immigration policy. As evidenced by this roundtable, *Detention Empire* promises to generate lively debate and future scholarship in immigration, foreign policy, and carceral studies.

Notes:

1. Some exceptional examples of this scholarship include Joseph

Nevins, *Operation Gatekeeper: The Rise of the 'Illegal Alien' and the Remaking of the U.S.-Mexico Boundary* (New York: Routledge, 2001); Erika Lee, *At America's Gates: Chinese Immigration During the Exclusion Era, 1882-1943* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003); Mae Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004); Daniel Kanstroom, *Deportation Nation: Outsiders in American History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007); *Migra! A History of the U.S. Border Patrol* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010); Hidetaka Hirota, *Expelling the Poor: Atlantic Seaboard States and the 19<sup>th</sup>-Century Origins of American Immigration Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017); S. Deborah Kang, *The INS on the Line: Making Immigration Law on the US-Mexico Border, 1917-1954* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017); Katherine Benton-Cohen, *Inventing the Immigration Problem: The Dillingham Commission and its Legacy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018); Adam Goodman, *The Deportation Machine: America's Long History of Expelling Immigrants* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020).

2. César Cuauhtémoc García Hernández, *Migrating to Prison: America's Obsession with Locking Up Immigrants* (New York: The New Press, 2019); Elliott Young, *Forever Prisoners: How the United States Made the World's Largest Immigrant Detention System* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021); Jessica Ordaz, *The Shadow of El Centro: A History of Migrant Incarceration and Solidarity* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2021).

## Review of Kristina Shull, *Detention Empire*

Hardeep Dhillon

In a photo on page 75 of Kristina Shull's *Detention Empire*, a Black girl sits on a chair, heels resting on the floor, toes pointing upward. Her hands are on her thighs, and she looks directly at you. Behind her, a Playboy bunny on the wall and next to that, a U.S. Army recruitment sticker. A stuffed doll sits on the table beside her bed.

This image captures the everyday life of a minor waiting to be released from detention at the Krome Detention Center in Miami, Florida, in 1980. It is symbolic of the carceral history of immigration detention and evokes its relationship to America's wars. It shows a child in the military barracks of a former nuclear base—barracks designed for male personnel who are trained in nuclear war and gun violence. She is sitting in a room decorated with an emblem of their sexual fantasies. The image reveals that the United States has made no effort to ease the burden of detained children. Instead, the government found a largely vacant facility and recommissioned it without putting a fresh layer of paint on its walls.

The Krome facility in which the unnamed young woman was detained in 1980 continues to be critical to the growing detention apparatus of the United States. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) oversees the operations of the facility, with private contractors handling all guard operations. Today, the Krome Detention Center is one of the nation's largest detention processing sites, and it continues to make national news for its rampant mistreatment of asylum seekers and refugees from nearly every part of the world. In response to its sporadic visitation hours, violations of due process and administrative processing, unhygienic and overcrowded conditions, prolonged detention under the looming threat of deportation, and family separation, detained immigrants and their allies across the nation have planted what Shull conceptualizes as the "seeds of resistance" to demand public visibility and improvement of the dreadful conditions they are detained in.

While these protests have spread across the country, the United States refuses to abolish or shrink immigration detention. Early in his presidential term, President Joe Biden issued Executive Order 14006, officially titled "Reforming Our Incarceration System to Eliminate the Use of Privately

Operated Criminal Detention Facilities." Executive Order 14006 was the Biden administration's response to the nation's growing carceral system which disproportionately impacts people of color while enabling private companies to make millions—in some cases billions—of dollars. The order, however, did not affect facilities managed on behalf of ICE and state governments. As a result, private detention is not ending at the federal level; it is only changing. Since Biden issued EO 14006, private companies are converting federal prisons into immigration detention spaces. For example, GEO Group, one of the nation's largest private prison firms, has shifted its focus to immigration detention with the aim of securing continued revenue through for-profit incarceration.

In part, Kristina Shull's *Detention Empire* is a history that explains this national moment—how the United States' inability to create a humane system of immigration processing and the transition to for-profit incarceration has produced a major increase in the number of immigrants detained and deported by the United States. Turning back four decades to the Reagan administration, *Detention Empire* provides a footprint for the history of detention in the United States.

In her analysis, Shull underlines how categories and architectures of war are marshaled in the expansion and reshaping of immigration detention. Hers is a project of the many U.S. empires, both at home and abroad, that elucidate the hierarchies of race, class, sexuality, and labor and that build different sorts of histories between refugees and asylum seekers from Central America and the Caribbean. She compels us to consider what it means to think of different imperial projects as interconnected sites of a "global crimmigration regime" through "new, counterinsurgent enforcement measures" adopted by the Reagan administration (5).

Reagan's Cold War on immigrants—by nature a "total war," as Shull describes it—relied heavily on enabling detention as a deterrent while expanding maritime drug and interdiction programs, the militarization of U.S. borders, and prison privatization (5–6). The scandal of the Reagan administration is not that it brought war home onto local populations of color and immigrant communities—that has been an undeniable feature of U.S. history stretching much farther back than the Reagan administration. U.S. history is replete with examples of how war came home and reshaped policing and incarceration with prolonged detainment, the movement of military personnel into the immigration system, the use of military infrastructure for immigrants, and manufactured crises.

Rather than analyzing the Reagan administration as either a historic departure or continuation of the past, Shull insists on reading the history of immigration detention as a "carceral palimpsest." She writes that "the term 'palimpsest' describes a re-inscription of new writing or design practices over old ones. Old patterns are not entirely obscured but still visible. Today's US immigration detention system sits atop entangled roots of settler colonialism, nativism, and war. Its implementation draws upon preexisting practices and spaces of incarceration" (5).

Most significantly, "carceral palimpsest" as an ordering concept enables Shull to reckon with the long legacies of slavery, Jim Crow segregation, Native American removal, and imperial expansion integral to immigration and carceral history without exceptionalizing the Reagan administration. She is modest in her explanation of the conceptual weight the concept holds, and further explanation of how the concept differs from more recent conceptualizations of detention and deportation that have gained traction among immigration scholars—using terms such as remote controls, machines, regimes,

and gatekeeping—would be welcome. Similarly, further explanation of her conceptualization of empire would be appreciated.

*Detention Empire* contributes to a range of historiography. For scholars familiar with the Cold War as a period of geopolitical tension between the United States and Soviet Union, of struggle for global influence fought through nuclear arms buildup, technological competitions, foreign aid as form of diplomatic persuasion, and deadly proxy wars, *Detention Empire* provides a new, multi-faceted understanding of the ways in which immigration detention was reconstructed through war tactics used against Central American and Caribbean refugees and asylum seekers. It details how the nation's expansion of immigration detention was reshaped by the Cold War through overlapping infrastructure, legal rationales, wartime measures, and military personnel.

For scholars acquainted with the Reagan administration's War on Drugs and the history of mass incarceration in the 1980s, *Detention Empire* details the centrality of immigration detention to the production of mass incarceration in this period. We also find new insights into Reagan's Mass Immigration Emergency Plan. Moreover, for scholars of immigration, *Detention Empire* provokes an important reconfiguration of the scale and scope of immigration detention through the lens of empire with an eye towards Central American and Caribbean refugees and asylum seekers. *Detention Empire* is also a timely addition to the growing body of scholarship on racial capitalism.

Shull underlines how immigration detention did not expand in relation to a singular immigrant community or war concern or tactic, but in response to multiple immigration crises that the Reagan administration manufactured and then "managed." In this analysis, relational race formations remain ever-present as we read how corporal and legal violence was employed most boldly against Black Haitian refugees and Indigenous communities from Central America.

I would like to provide a short summary for readers who are new to these bodies of scholarship. *Detention Empire* places the Sun Belt at the center of immigration history, shifting our focus from the far more studied U.S.-Mexico borderland and Pacific and Atlantic seaboard. The Sun Belt region, as Shull details, is home to the largest incarcerated population in the United States as a result of for-profit prisons and contracts that historically emerged at the intersection of war and imperialism during the Reagan era.

The first chapter of *Detention Empire* describes how detention during the Reagan era was an enhanced iteration of carceral practices in the United States. Shull conceptualizes this framework through the notion of the carceral palimpsest. Chapter 2 analyzes how Cuban detention "ushered in a monumental, punitive shift in the politics and architectures of asylum" (32). As an increasing number of Cubans arrived on the nation's shores during the Mariel boatlifts, discourses of compassion shifted; Americans began to fear refugee criminals and demand greater public safety. Cuban refugees were relocated to military bases such as Fort Chaffee, Arkansas, as rumors of their criminal activity and involvement in the drug trade proliferated.

Chapter 3 details the Reagan administration's creation of the world's first extraterritorial maritime interdiction program to thwart the arrival of Haitian refugees and the employment of a former nuclear missile site to "process" Haitians who managed to arrive in the United States. In reading the chapter on the Krome facility in Miami, Florida, one is confronted by the harrowing conditions Black Haitian refugees endured on the nation's borders and in its detention centers, where physical abuse, family

separation, and violations of due process were rampant. In addition to Krome, Shull focuses on the Fort Allen Detention Center, located on a former U.S. Navy base in Puerto Rico. Her descriptions of conditions there underline how Black immigration has been integral to the nation's expansion of carceral spaces overseas.

Chapter 4 presents an insightful analysis of the U.S. asylum system. Shull contends that the US asylum system "was an extension of Reagan's counterinsurgent warfare in Central America—with the denial of state-sponsored violence as a central feature" (133). She details how the government denied its violent involvement in U.S.-backed proxy wars and dismissed the allegation that it supported foreign governments that abetted genocide. At the same time, it justified increasing the militarization of the southern border by stressing the need for a new "War on Drugs" and stronger crime enforcement. While it was doing that it was denying asylum applications for those who fled from Central America, particularly Guatemala, Nicaragua, and El Salvador.

Shull's attention to Indigenous communities is a reminder for many of us that immigration history must remain attuned to Indigenous histories. Chapter 5 follows this history through the sanctuary caravan to Seattle, detailing the creation of a New Underground Railroad to church sites where the Reagan administration attempted to undermine solidarity through covert tactics such as paid informants, private investigations, intimidation, and raids. The final chapter describes in detail the two of the longest prison uprisings in U.S. history: one at Oakdale, Louisiana, and another in Atlanta. Led by Mariel Cubans, the uprisings were a response to the atrocious conditions created in the prisons as ideas about fiscal austerity, the privatization of prison budgets, and the practice of incarceration for profit took hold.

From one perspective, *Detention Empire* is inevitably a history of the U.S. administrative state and its power over the lives of immigrants through new private channels that enabled the state to shape and construct borders, interject itself into new jurisdictions and spaces, and unravel lives. The book presents a history of the racial formations that were central to the treatment of discrete refugee and asylum communities during the Reagan era, but it raises questions about the myriad actors that are central to this history as the United States expanded immigration detention and deportation within and beyond its borders.

From prison guards to bureaucrats hired to lead immigration commissions, U.S. consuls and diplomats, the Bureau of Prisons, and the Department of Justice, the reader is asked to consider the complicity of various wings of the U.S. government in creating a regime of immigration and border enforcement that operates with and through regimes of racial capital. This story comes together powerfully but leaves the reader asking where immigration enforcement begins and ends. Where do power structures of immigration detention slip, elide, or change? How can an integration of histories from the global South retell histories of immigration, including immigration detention, without unilaterally projecting the United States, and by default U.S. history, onto the world?

Even as these regimes solidify and take new forms, there is resistance to them: hunger strikes led by Cubans at Fort Chaffee; the intervention of religious leaders, communities, and leading civil rights organizations such as the NAACP and ACLU; protests by feminist activists (including a number from the newspaper *Off Our Backs*) and detained prisoners (including women and children); fact-finding missions conducted by students and faculty in Central America; and citizens using the courts and public campaigns to draw attention to horrendous detention conditions and a violation of basic legal ethics.

These seeds of resistance, Shull insists, “defin[ed] a new era of public, transnational protest surrounding exceptional forms of discrimination and due process violations in detention—especially as escalating violence in detention reflected new expressions of US global power” (11). Making the stories of persecution and terrible conditions in refugee and asylum centers visible was a task that was taken on by members of a transnational network that sought to publicize the plight of individuals that the state hoped to keep invisible behind the walls of detention or through deportation. Shull, through rigorous archival research into such groups, provides us with yet another example of the role history has to play in the production of abolitionist frames.

Given the many methods scholars have employed to read resistance and agency in history, and the wide range of poetry, drawings, photography, public performance, and speech acts that Shull analyzes, I would like to invite her to describe the methods that underpin her own reading practice and address the difficulties of reading the past without ascribing intention, all the while balancing countless gaps and omissions, on the one hand, and an occasional overabundance of archival material, on the other. In what ways are the stories we tell of marginalized persons still produced through the state?

In pondering this question myself, I am reminded of a quote Shull cites from John Lewis, the Atlanta-based politician and civil rights activist. Lewis, in analyzing a prison uprising by Mariel Cubans during a House hearing in February 1988, noted that it took place “in a country that has prided itself in welcoming oppressed people yearning for freedom. The last seven years have been wasted for these Cuban detainees. We have wasted a significant portion of their lives” (226). In a single quote, Lewis eloquently captured the harsh realities of immigration detention and compelled the nation to recognize precisely what refugees and asylum seekers were protesting: the willingness of the United States to squander human lives.

Conceptualized through Lewis’s perspective, the history of immigration detention and resistance is a history not only of resistance but of lives. The detained have lost far more than their history of resistance. How do we account, then, for all that they have lost? And what they have inherited instead?

In the spirit of the voices that echo across the pages of Shull’s indispensable *Detention Empire: La lucha sigue*. The struggle continues.

### Review of Kristina Shull, *Detention Empire: Reagan’s War on Immigrants and the Seeds of Resistance*

Michelle D. Paranzino

The end of the Cold War has traditionally loomed large in historical accounts of the Ronald Reagan presidency, and for good reason. It was a momentous development that fundamentally transformed the international strategic environment, and Reagan himself played no small role in bringing it to pass. Though historians have debated the scope and significance of that role, few have denied Reagan some measure of credit in finding common ground with his Soviet counterpart, Mikhail Gorbachev, and in possessing the degree of emotional intelligence and tactical flexibility that allowed negotiations to go forward. It is fair to say that with regard to the end of the Cold War, Reagan’s statesmanship has typically been judged favorably. Since it has been widely considered the pivotal development of the Reagan era, it is no wonder that the man himself is

popularly remembered as one of the greatest presidents in U.S. history.

When it comes to overall U.S. foreign policy in the Reagan era, however, a more critical view emerges, particularly in reference to regions like Africa and Latin America, where U.S. support for apartheid and repressive right-wing governments (and non-state actors like the Contras) was fundamentally at odds with Reagan’s rhetoric of liberty and democracy.<sup>1</sup> Kristina Shull joins scholars like Doug Rossinow and Daniel S. Lucks in rethinking Reagan’s domestic and foreign policies and their legacies for the present day.<sup>2</sup> Her book creates a bridge linking histories of the Reagan era and biographies of Reagan himself to a burgeoning literature on the roots of mass incarceration.<sup>3</sup> In *Detention Empire*, she presents a thoroughly researched and thought-provoking account of Reagan-era U.S. policies toward immigration, especially immigration from the Caribbean and Central America. In doing so, she demonstrates the inextricability of foreign and domestic policies and helps to lay the theoretical groundwork for understanding the causes and consequences of Reagan’s war on immigrants.

The introduction begins by centering the Mariel Cuban migration of 1980 in what Shull calls “the Reagan imaginary,” which she defines as “a vision and strategy of white nationalist state-making.” Not only did this imaginary create a “blueprint for mapping new frontiers of imperial expansion and carceral landscapes,” but it “still undergirds the false logic of US bordering practices today.” One of the book’s fundamental premises is that “immigration detention operates as a form of *counterinsurgency*, a strategy of preemptive warfare targeting those deemed enemies of the state.”<sup>4</sup> The criminalization of migration—what scholars have referred to as “cimmigration”—has paralleled other developments in the growth of mass incarceration, especially the increasing privatization of detention facilities and the profits accumulated from the prison industrial complex (3).

Shull defines “Reagan’s Cold War on immigrants” as “a suite of new, counterinsurgent enforcement measures adopted by his administration during its first term that cemented in place a globalized cimmigration regime” (5). She contends that “immigration control became a thread tying together the Reagan administration’s reassertion of US hegemony and white supremacy in its domestic, foreign policy, and neoliberal economic agendas” (10). She also demonstrates that the Reagan administration’s anti-immigration policies were part of an overarching neoliberal economic agenda via an examination of the Caribbean Basin Initiative, a bipartisan regional program explicitly seeking to staunch migration flows from the region (85). The administration promoted what was in effect a new form of economic imperialism as a “security shield against the twin threats of migration and political subversion” (90).

Reagan’s war on immigrants was thus bound up in the larger Cold War. His “calls to stem migration from the Caribbean and Central America” went “hand in hand with halting ‘evil empire’ Soviet-Cuban communist insurgency across the hemisphere” (52). In addition, he portrayed the domestic national security threat posed by Soviet-Cuban-Nicaraguan relations as an unstoppable flow of migrants to the United States seeking freedom from the red menace. In order to combat this perceived threat, the Reagan administration created “the world’s first extraterritorial maritime interdiction program” (78). Not only were the results of the program’s implementation catastrophic for migrants themselves, but the program itself “legitimized the expansion of US executive authority in immigration enforcement on the high seas, allowing for ‘anti-smuggling,’ ‘anti-communist,’ ‘anti-drug,’ and later ‘anti-terrorist’ efforts across contexts” (81).

An important part of Shull’s book is devoted to exploring

the “seeds of resistance” that sprang up to oppose ever harsher treatment of migrants. Although U.S. immigration policies enjoyed overwhelming bipartisan support, vocal critics did emerge. Jesse Jackson was one of the most visible opponents, and he used his public platform to point out the hypocrisy of U.S. treatment of Haitian migrants. In an opinion piece, he juxtaposed the Reagan administration’s embrace of anticommunist refugees with its rejection of Haitian asylum-seekers: “Polish refugees, Soviet Jews, and Nicaraguans, just to mention a few, are welcomed because they suit the Cold War foreign policy needs of the Reagan Administration. . . . To admit that the Haitians are escaping repression would be to admit that the United States is party to the oppression” (98). Interestingly, Jackson apparently opposed the Carter administration’s immigration policies as well, as he organized a march to an INS detention site in Miami in the spring of 1980, before Reagan was elected (97).

The seeds of resistance also sprouted into organizations like the Sanctuary Movement and the Chicago Religious Task Force on Central America (CRTFCA). The “inside-outside” resistance used by such groups involved the collaborative efforts of those suffering inside detention facilities and people outside who often had some sort of personal relationship with detainees. This resistance became the focus of executive-level efforts to discredit and disrupt these organizations, in the COINTELPRO tradition of destroying dissident groups through surveillance, harassment, and infiltration.

Shull posits “detention itself as a counterinsurgent set of practices and narratives of erasure and denial” (184). But doing so raises the larger question of whether immigration policies and practices can properly be characterized as counterinsurgency. Not only is Shull’s definition of counterinsurgency as a strategy of preemptive warfare overly broad, but she does not devote much intellectual energy to tracking the evolution of U.S. counterinsurgency doctrine and practice as it arose within and responded to specific historical contexts. Nor does she parse the differences between the arguments of counterinsurgency theorists and actual developments on the ground in places like Vietnam or El Salvador.

Instead, Shull deploys these terms almost interchangeably. For instance, she describes the Sandinista government in Nicaragua as a “leftist insurgency” during a period when the former insurgents were already in power, and she characterizes the *contras* as “counterinsurgents” (118), when they were in fact counter-revolutionary *insurgents* battling a constituted government that enjoyed a significant degree of international legitimacy. Moreover, counterinsurgency in both theory and practice has not typically been considered a preemptive strategy, but rather a response to the rise and spread of an insurgency. Shull appears to view low-intensity conflict doctrine as essentially a rehash of counterinsurgency, but she neglects to examine the definitional components of each or to explore their evolution.

Does it make sense to characterize U.S. immigration policies as a form of counterinsurgency? Did U.S. officials view migrants as a potential counterinsurgent threat, or did their concerns reflect a more deeply rooted urge to protect the border against “undesirables” and keep America white? Surely the Reagan administration’s white nationalist state-making project has antecedents stretching back in U.S. history. There is nothing new about the culture wars over how to define the role of the United States in the world and what it means to be American. But whether this can profitably be analyzed as a form of counterinsurgency is a case that still needs to be made. In this regard, Shull could have profited from drawing on the work of Brian D’Haeseleer, whose book on U.S. counterinsurgency in El Salvador might have helped her construct a more solid theoretical foundation for her arguments.<sup>5</sup>

Another of the big questions that emerges from the book is to what extent the Reagan administration pioneered ever harsher policies toward and treatment of immigrants and to what extent it merely built on the legacy of its predecessor. This question tracks a broader historiographical debate over change and continuity from the Carter to the Reagan administration.<sup>6</sup> Many of the trends in U.S. immigration policies and procedures predated Reagan, including a long-standing politicization of immigration from Cuba and Haiti, with the “wet foot, dry foot” policy toward Cubans intended to showcase the horrors of Castro’s communist regime, and a much more neglectful attitude toward Haitians that clearly demonstrated Haitian migrants were not welcome in the United States.

Indeed, as Shull notes, “Haitians stand out as being overwhelmingly denied refugee status”—to the extent that of the 50,000 or so Haitians seeking asylum between 1972 and 1980, only 25 were successful (68). The Mariel boat lift created a class of Cuban migrants in the United States—the Mariel Cubans—who were the subjects of an “astounding proliferation of narratives of Cuban deviance in US media” (39). This raises a crucial question that Shull does not directly engage: What is the role and responsibility of the U.S. news media in manufacturing domestic consent to strip migrants of their human worth and dignity? Were U.S. immigration policies a driver or a consequence of these popular attitudes toward migrants? Shull suggests that “both humanitarian calls to protect vulnerable refugees and xenophobic anger over migrant deviance served to justify the institutional solutions the Carter and Reagan administrations sought in mitigating the media and political fallout of Mariel” (45). The American public clearly bears some of the moral responsibility for the deeply immoral treatment of migrants, but how much exactly, and is it possible to force a moral reckoning?

Shull demonstrates that “the extraordinary forms of violence and discrimination targeting Haitians since the 1970s paved the way for Reagan’s detention and interdiction policies, as Carter-era rhetorics of humanitarianism gave way to counterinsurgent responses to those deemed threats to the nation” (101). Yet again, the continuity in U.S. treatment of Haitians across presidential administrations reveals the necessity of distinguishing more carefully between rhetoric, intentions, and consequences. Whereas humanitarian rhetoric may have masked or disguised violence toward Haitians, the shift toward the rhetoric of national security in one of the most confrontational and crisis-ridden periods of the Cold War may have unleashed even greater violence—violence similar to that produced by Trump’s success in tapping into (and ultimately emboldening and empowering) a deep vein of racism and misogyny running through American society.

*Detention Empire* is a must-read for anyone interested in the broader moral ramifications of U.S. foreign relations and the inextricability of foreign and domestic policies. Shull’s arguments deserve wide readership and can help inform the way we think about the role of the United States in the world and the scope of state power at home. Though the book is often tough to read, as it deals with a subject most Americans would likely prefer to remain ignorant of, this is precisely why it needs to reach an audience broader than the community of U.S. foreign policy scholars. The American public must grapple with the human consequences of its demands upon the state.

#### Notes:

1. See, for instance, Jonathan R. Hunt and Simon Miles, eds., *The Reagan Moment: America and the World in the 1980s* (Ithaca, NY, 2021).
2. Daniel S. Lucks, *Reconsidering Reagan: Racism, Republicans, and the Road to Trump* (Boston, MA, 2020); Doug Rossinow, *The Reagan Era: A History of the 1980s* (New York, 2015).

3. See, for instance, Elizabeth Hinton, *From the War on Poverty to the War on Crime: The Making of Mass Incarceration in America* (Cambridge, MA, 2016); and Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York, 2010).
4. Kristina Shull, *Detention Empire: Reagan's War on Immigrants and the Seeds of Resistance* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2021), 1.
5. Brian D'Haeseleer, *The Salvadoran Crucible: The Failure of US Counterinsurgency in El Salvador, 1979–1992* (Lawrence, KS, 2017); see also his article, "'Drawing the line' in El Salvador: Washington confronts insurgency in El Salvador, 1979–92," *Cold War History* 18:2 (2018): 131–48.
6. See Aaron Donaghy, *The Second Cold War: Carter, Reagan, and the Politics of Foreign Policy* (Cambridge, UK, 2021).

## Review of Kristina Shull, *Detention Empire*

Danielle Olden

Kristina Shull's *Detention Empire: Reagan's War on Immigrants and the Seeds of Resistance* is a revelation. Combining histories of foreign policy, political culture, migration, detention and resistance, the book gives historians and other scholars a model of historical scholarship that will inform discussions of U.S. history for years to come. One of its most significant contributions is its insistence on and demonstration of the interconnectedness of covert warfare (both at home and abroad), immigration, and the origins of the U.S. carceral state. Historians increasingly have been drawing such connections, and their work has revealed the centrality of U.S. empire-making in increasing migration flows from Latin America and the corresponding growth of detention for undocumented migrants.

In its contribution to this scholarship, *Detention Empire* argues that immigration detention is a form of counterinsurgency that operated on multiple levels to construct migrants as "enemies of the state," both as criminals in violation of U.S. border policy and holders of on-the-ground knowledge about U.S. foreign policy and empire-making during the Cold War. Such intimate knowledge, if revealed to the U.S. and global publics, had the potential to stymie U.S. foreign policy goals. The modern immigration detention system thus emerged out of a "dialectic of resistance and retaliation," as migrants from Cuba, Haiti, and Central America challenged their imprisonment and attempts at silencing them. Shull shows that the Reagan administration responded to these threats by expanding the nation's immigration detention system and, in the process, waging a total war against immigrants.

Conceptualizing this war on immigrants as both a Cold War and a total war enables Shull to develop her provocative argument. Here, she makes the critical move of transposing concepts typically reserved for discussing U.S. foreign engagements—*counterinsurgency* and *total war*, but also *Cold War*, to some extent—to the domestic realm. More precisely, she articulates the mutually constitutive nature of the foreign and the domestic when it comes to U.S. immigration policy, mass incarceration, and war during and after the Cold War.

Shull defines Reagan's "Cold War on immigrants" as "a suite of new counterinsurgent enforcement measures adopted by his administration during its first term that cemented in place a globalized crimmigration regime" (5). Crimmigration, a concept developed by immigration scholars, is central to understanding modern American immigration politics and, in particular, the ways that immigration policies have criminalized undocumented migrants within the context of an increasingly xenophobic, nativist, and racist U.S. political culture. This suite of new measures included the detention of asylum-seekers, drug and immigrant interdiction programs, prison privatization, and the militarization of not just the U.S.-Mexico border but,

as Reagan liked to say in speeches from the era, the third and fourth borders (the Caribbean and Central America) as well. Conceiving of each new flow of asylum-seekers from Cuba, Haiti, and Central America as an immigration emergency in need of quick solutions, "Reagan's war on immigrants normalized crisis as a mode of governing, cementing new detention structures in response to, and in anticipation of, crises of the U.S. government's own making that today appear perpetual" (6).

Uncovering how this narrative of crisis was constructed and deployed in the late 1970s and 1980s, Shull astutely pinpoints the ways that political messages and the subsequent public circulation of those messages often build on older ideas that are rooted in long-standing debates over who the United States is as a nation. "American," writes Eric Foner, "is what philosophers call an 'essentially contested concept'—one that by its very nature is subject to multiple and conflicting interpretations."<sup>1</sup> Yet even while Americanism is contested, much of what foregrounds these debates are mythologies about the nation's founding, its expansion, and its role in the world—mythologies grounded in notions of American exceptionalism.

Who qualifies as American has always been about race, gender, class, sexuality, religion, ability, and national origin. Those deemed undesirable have often been cast as particular problems for the nation, crises that demand policy solutions. Immigration scholars have demonstrated the ways these policies restricted not only particular bodies from crossing the nation's borders; they also recast the borders of belonging and citizenship for those within them. Shull's work builds on these histories to highlight how the system of immigrant detention was developed and sold to the American public as a response to the immigration emergencies supposedly spawned by Cubans, Haitians, and Central Americans in the 1980s.

Immigration crisis narratives merged with preexisting carceral practices and ideologies in what Shull characterizes as a "carceral palimpsest" (5, 14–28). *Detention Empire* details how the system of immigrant detention was constructed using blueprints from earlier state control projects rooted in settler colonialism, racial domination, labor exploitation, and imperialism. Following Kelly Lytle Hernandez's influential work, Shull considers Indigenous removal, slavery, Jim Crow, wars of imperial expansion, and Japanese incarceration during World War II to be central to the development of systems of "mass elimination," including incarceration.<sup>2</sup>

The Reagan administration used these blueprints while also creating new methods of state control. Shull describes that process as "empire-in-action."<sup>3</sup> The Cold War accelerated the use of covert warfare exercises abroad, exercises that included various counterinsurgency measures. These military practices were brought home in U.S. efforts to infiltrate and sabotage various civil rights movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Shull's innovation is to demonstrate how Reagan's war on immigrants, a war that resulted in the expansion of detention as deterrence, was also marked by the same kinds of subversion and retaliation that characterized U.S. proxy wars abroad. As migrants challenged their treatment in the United States—particularly INS processes for determining qualifications for asylum, family separation, detention, detention conditions, and deportation—federal actors (who, it should be noted, almost always had state and local approval) punished them with increasingly harsh measures.

The 1980 arrival in south Florida of Cuban migrants, who came to be known as the Mariel Cubans, the resulting public outcry, and governmental responses to this "crisis" established patterns and policy proposals that became integral to Reagan's 1982 Mass Immigration Emergency Plan. Occurring during the last year of Jimmy Carter's presidency, the Mariel crisis played a key role in the

November elections that year, helping to usher Reagan into his first term.

Shull shows how these migrants, fleeing Communist Cuba, came to be constructed as threats to the nation. Unlike earlier Cuban refugees, the Mariel migrants did not conform to U.S. expectations of immigrant respectability. As a group, they were darker. Approximately 30 to 50 percent of them were Afro-Cuban. Of those who were imprisoned long-term in U.S. detention facilities, 75 percent were Afro-Cuban. In contrast, only 8 to 10 percent of those who were quickly resettled after arrival were Black (33). Moreover, most of the 1980 migrants were single men. Some defied gender and sexual norms: they were queer, trans, and gender nonconforming (QTGNC), or at least presented themselves that way to gain asylum in the United States.<sup>4</sup>

Once the rumor began that Fidel Castro had opened his prisons and put criminals and social pariahs on the boats, it spread like wildfire, and even the humanitarian Jimmy Carter had to respond. Not even three weeks after the first Mariel Cubans arrived, he declared a state of emergency in south Florida. The idea that the Communist Cuban president was unleashing “undesirables” upon the United States contributed to the racialized and sexualized idea that these Cubans were dangerous. The specter of large numbers of Black, sexually deviant male criminals, a narrative that local and national media helped develop and reproduce, legitimized the punitive turn toward indefinite detention that Reagan embraced once in office.

As a historian of race, racial formation, and Latinxs in the United States, I can say confidently that *Detention Empire* stands out for its attention to the global dimensions of the U.S. racial project that positions non-European migrants as problems in need of policy solutions. These “solutions,” in turn, have further entrenched “neo-conservative politics, neoliberal economics, and long-standing mythologies of settler colonialism,” a process that has enabled the continuation of racist, homophobic, and gendered U.S. immigration policies and the rise of a “detention empire” (1). An important dimension of this racial project, as of all U.S. racial projects, was anti-blackness. Shull’s sustained attention to the social, cultural, and political dynamics of anti-blackness and its gendered and sexualized components highlights the pervasiveness and intractability of long-standing anti-Black ideologies in U.S. culture and society.

On the surface, it would seem that the Haitian case would present the most revealing examples of anti-Black U.S. policymaking. Indeed, Shull writes that “Haitians have suffered some of the detention system’s most extreme injustices” (69). As Haitian “boat people” fled the right-wing dictatorship of Jean-Claude Duvalier and arrived in the United States, successive efforts to delegitimize their asylum claims, force them into detention, and/or deport them highlighted U.S. geopolitical aims during the Cold War and revealed a larger context of anti-Black racism. Almost all Haitian asylum claims were denied, a result of the argument that these people were not refugees fleeing persecution but “economic migrants,” simply seeking better opportunities for economic advancement. Immigration authorities conveniently ignored both Duvalier’s human rights abuses and American complicity in perpetuating those abuses.

Interdiction, moreover, put the U.S. Coast Guard to work in the name of stopping Haitian migrants before they even arrived in the United States. The Reagan Justice Department legally justified this policy—“the world’s first extraterritorial maritime interdiction program”—in 1981 by noting that there was no precedent for such action (78). The attorney general’s Office of Legal Council instead legitimized interdiction by citing certain sections of the 1952 Immigration and Nationality Act and a Supreme Court case, *Knauff v. Shaughnessy* (1950).<sup>5</sup> “The exclusion of aliens is a fundamental act of sovereignty,” the court stated

in that opinion. “The right to do so stems not alone from the legislative power but is inherent in the executive power to control the foreign affairs of the nation” (80).

As Shull demonstrates, White House memos reveal mixed opinions and reservations about interdiction and the dubious legal justifications supporting it. Yet in the end, Reagan implemented the policy as an emergency measure, one put in place to deal with yet another so-called immigration emergency. While interdiction targeted Haitians alone, its creation led directly from contingency plans drafted by Reagan’s Task Force on Immigration in response to the Mariel Cuban “crisis.”

Here is where Shull’s analysis is most significant and revealing in terms of its contribution to our understanding of the operation of anti-blackness in U.S. policymaking in the 1980s. By showing how the Reagan administration linked Cubans and Haitians in its construction of a broader immigration problem facing the nation, *Detention Empire* documents the ways that anti-Black ideologies work to erase important differences both within and outside the U.S. Cuba and Haiti occupied similar positions vis-à-vis the United States. Both had histories of U.S. colonialism and military occupation, and both had substantial black populations. In 1980, when large numbers of Cuban and Haitian immigrants began arriving in south Florida, much of the American public and its policymakers understood them as intimately connected. For Reagan, these *combined* migrations represented the same (black and criminal) danger and led to his hyper-focus on the Caribbean as both a Cold War hot spot and immigration emergency.

While outlining the broad contours of this anti-Black policymaking, Shull remains cognizant of the different and unequal ways Cubans and Haitians were treated in detention. Conditions were poor for both groups but remained much more dire for Haitians. Cubans, moreover, could not be deported, according to Reagan’s orders. Haitians, conversely, were often deported. Anti-Black thinking was flexible; it distinguished one group as more deserving than the other yet united them in the service of propelling and validating Reagan’s war on immigrants.

As powerful and unyielding as this war on immigrants was, resistance to it reminds us that humanity still has room to grow within even the most inhumane of systems. *Detention Empire* handles Cuban, Haitian, and Central American resistance stories with compassion and care, while maintaining critical perspective. Migrants arriving from El Salvador and Guatemala, for example, were “living testimony of U.S. foreign policy failures.” Their stories of survival in the face of extreme violence enacted by U.S.-trained, U.S.-funded, and U.S.-backed state forces in their home countries resonated with increasing numbers of Americans and others who criticized Reagan’s hardline anti-communist approach in Central America. As the death count mounted, the Reagan administration continued to deny U.S. collusion with right-wing death squads and state-sponsored torture.

The Sanctuary Movement emerged in this context, bringing people of faith, human rights advocates, migrant rights supporters, and Central American peace movement participants together in a social movement that defied U.S. border policy and its attendant carceral turn. This “New Underground Railroad,” as the Sanctuary Movement network was called, ferried Central American refugees from the U.S.-Mexico border to sanctuary sites across the United States, often stopping to allow refugees to publicize their *testimonios*. These testimonies, provided by migrants who fully understood the precariousness of their situations and the potential dangers they faced by going public, were the most poignant weapons they had in their struggle for safety, justice, and humanity for themselves and their families. Speaking their truths in direct defiance of Reagan’s attempts to erase them was a powerful method of

resistance that helped legitimize the Sanctuary Movement in the eyes of many Americans who had taken their president at his word. As one family in Sanctuary reported, "It is impossible for you to imagine how much I wish to put the truth in your hearts and take off the blindfolds that keep you from seeing" (168)<sup>6</sup>.

Exposing difficult truths is always contested, yet it is one of the most profound responsibilities of a historian. *Detention Empire* takes up this challenge with intention and skill. It is expertly researched, intelligently argued, and well written. Shull's journey into the United States' immigrant detention system began with a personal entanglement within it, a trauma that deeply informs their perspective and analysis. This only enriches the book and showcases how history can become, in the author's words, "its own form of organizing" (xiii). Ultimately, the book succeeds at providing the kind of critical analysis that is necessary to challenge what has become common sense policymaking: detention as deterrence. In this sense, I join the author in seeing this book as a building block for the imagining of abolitionist futures. Just as a system of mass incarceration can be constructed, so too can it be deconstructed.

#### Notes:

1. Eric Foner, "Who Is an American?" in *Who Owns History? Rethinking the Past in a Changing World* (New York, 2002), 151.
2. Kelly Lytle Hernández, *City of Inmates: Conquest, Rebellion, and the Rise of Human Caging in Los Angeles, 1771–1965* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2017).
3. "Empire-in action" includes "exercises of state control over migrant bodies, denial, and erasure in detention" (15).
4. Shull explains that "although it is impossible to know the overall number of QTGNC . . . Mariel migrants because of misreporting and the state's lack of record keeping, this group received a disproportionate amount of media attention" (33).
5. United States ex rel. Knauff v. Shaughnessy, 338 U.S. 537 (1950).
6. *Sanctuary Perspectives, Darlene Nicgorski Papers on the Sanctuary Movement*, Honnold/Mudd Library, Claremont University Consortium, Claremont, CA.

### Review of Shull, *Detention Empire*

Jason Colby

The Central American wars have largely faded from U.S. memory. While the Vietnam War continues to loom large in popular culture and George W. Bush's War on Terror still shapes the American worldview, U.S. policy toward Central America and the Caribbean inspires few discussions or feature films these days. Thus it is easy to forget that Reagan's sponsorship of conflict in Central America was the most controversial foreign policy issue of the 1973–2003 period and that it sparked the largest protest movement against U.S. foreign policy since the Vietnam War.

Throughout the 1980s, El Salvador and Nicaragua, in particular, were constantly in the news. Reagan's obsession with overthrowing the leftist Sandinista government in Nicaragua led directly to the Iran-Contra Scandal of 1987, which nearly brought down his administration. Not coincidentally, the decade witnessed an outpouring of writing on the conflict, not only by journalists but by luminaries such as Joan Didion and leading historians such as Walter LaFeber.<sup>1</sup> Yet the related targeting of immigrants—not only Central American but also Cuban and Haitian—failed to generate nearly the same attention among journalists or scholars. In his study of the U.S. Central America peace movement, for example, sociologist Christian Smith touched upon the migration from war-torn El Salvador and Guatemala that drove the Sanctuary

movement, but it was not his focus.<sup>2</sup>

In recent years, leading scholars have returned to the Central American wars to explain current issues and policies. Greg Grandin has explored the connections between Reagan's Central America policy and the war on terror as well as the roots of U.S. racial nationalism. For her part, leading immigration historian Maria Cristina Garcia has compared the response of Canada, the United States, and Mexico to Central American migration. Even more recently Aviva Chomsky has examined the role of the wars of the 1980s in driving that migration.<sup>3</sup> Yet none of them has framed their study around the origins and ramifications of the Reagan administration's immigration policies. This is the task Kristina Shull sets for herself in *Detention Empire*.

Shull begins with a breathtaking and heartwrenching preface to which no summary in a book review can do justice. Suffice it to say, she has very good reasons for having personal and political stakes in her research, and she never hides her conviction that the Reagan administration's treatment of immigrants from Central America and the Caribbean, which continues to shape present policy, represents a stain on the nation's history. In her words, *Detention Empire* explores "how intertwining histories of US imperialism, mass incarceration, and a resurgence of white nationalist state-making under the Reagan administration define today's US immigration detention system" (xiv).

Along with this political edge, Shull brings strong storytelling skills and painstaking attention to detail. The result is a compelling analysis of the interplay between the rise of large-scale, repressive detention of migrants, especially in the for-profit carceral sector, and extensive on-the-ground resistance to those policies. Drawing upon a wide range of archival research, oral history, and community-based scholarship, Shull produces a powerful indictment of what she calls "Reagan's war on immigrants." In the process, she reminds us of the high stakes of doing history, which she clearly views as a form of activism and counter-hegemonic action. Whether a scholarly monograph can achieve such heavy political lifting is debatable. As a historian who thought he knew quite a bit about the topic in question, however, I can say that most readers won't view the 1980s in the same way again after reading this book.

Organizing her material into six richly detailed chapters, Shull makes a number of original and critical contributions to our understanding of the period. First, she traces how the language of "crisis" created a template for U.S. officials to expand the long-term detention of undocumented immigrants and connected it to the for-profit private prison industry sector that exploded in the 1980s and beyond. The inception point for this trend was the controversy surrounding the Mariel boatlift from Cuba in 1980, which, she argues "was a galvanizing event for these transformations, ushering in a sea change in border policing and prison policy making" (1).

It was the controversy over the housing of Mariel Cubans in Fort Chafee, Arkansas, as well as debates about their release, that revealed the efficacy of rhetoric focusing on an immigration "crisis"—first utilized by the Carter administration and then greatly expanded under Reagan. Yet Shull consistently emphasizes that such rhetoric was always about building public support for repressive measures. "The real crisis is not migration itself but the racism underwriting the rise of a global crimmigration regime," she asserts (16). Ultimately, the Reagan administration decided to move the Mariel Cubans to other facilities in response to local resentment against their presence. As she explains, "The legacy of the Reagan administration's handling of Fort Chafee was the criminalization of Mariel Cubans and the buildup of a more permanent immigration detention system that led to the unprecedented use of private contract facilities beginning in 1983" (59).



Second, Shull does a superb job of underscoring the interwoven nature of U.S. foreign and immigration policy. Because of Cold War politics, for example, Cubans fleeing Castro's regime were defined as political refugees, whereas Haitians escaping a nation that was a U.S. ally were defined as economic refugees. Yet she also explores how immigration policy and concerns influenced U.S. foreign policy—something diplomatic historians often miss. The administration's expansive effort to interdict Haitian immigrants in cooperation with the Haitian government, for example, "marked a new extension of executive authority beyond US borders to affirm state sovereignty over migrant rights" (69). At the same time, racialized fears of large-scale Haitian migration fed the rhetoric of crisis. "Ultimately," she notes, "the administration justified Haitian interdiction through the specter, not the reality, of mass migration" (83).

Shull also examines the very real mass migration crisis of the period—the human tragedy of Central America migration. And like Chomsky, she highlights how Reagan's support of conflict in Central America drove the very migration that his administration abhorred. By 1984, she notes, the State Department estimated that "around 500,000 Salvadorans, one-tenth of the country's population, had entered the United States without papers" (106).

Third, Shull makes a strong case that we should view Reagan's policies toward Central American migrants as a form of counterinsurgency. Central American migrants faced policies in the United States that were aimed at erasing their existence and silencing their narratives—much like those of the repressive governments from which they fled. "In sum," she argues, "despite the stated intent of operational procedures, transfers, segregation, isolation, and other counterinsurgent security measures used in jail keeping, such as counts and shakedowns, ultimately served the dual purpose of retaliating against migrants and silencing them in the system" (177).

Fourth, and in a related vein, Shull explores how these repressive measures generated various forms of resistance, not only from well-known U.S. activist groups such as Sanctuary, but also among imprisoned migrants and their families. Rooted in oral history work with former activists and migrants, this is one of the most important contributions Shull makes, particularly in how she connects migrant resistance, including prison takeovers, to more well-known forms of activism in the period. "Mounting protests did not just target specific conditions and civil rights abuses in detention" she emphasizes, "but also connected them to Reagan's foreign policies to challenge the logic of detention itself" (150).

Shull's fifth contribution may seem subtle, but it represents a key historiographical and political intervention. In consistently circling back to the fates of detainees, particularly the long detentions of Haitians and the Mariel Cubans, she prevents readers from doing what the American media and public did in the 1980s (and much of historiography has since): forgetting about migrants suffering under indefinite detention in U.S. facilities. Among the most striking examples of this is her detailed discussion of the transfer of Haitians from the Rome facility in Miami to Fort Allen in Puerto Rico. In effect, such committed storytelling counteracts the historical efforts of the Reagan administration to erase such people from public view and consciousness.

Last, but not least, Shull draws both definitive and suggestive connections between the policies of the 1980s and the more recent controversies surrounding the treatment of immigrants under the Trump administration. Among the connections she highlights are the roles played by individual policymakers in both eras. For example, she shows how Rudolph Giuliani had a pivotal role in framing and justifying many of the detention policies of the 1980s. More broadly, she reveals earlier practices of family

separation and child detention that many have viewed as unique to the Trump presidency.

Despite these key contributions, *Detention Empire* does have weaknesses. The first is its academic, sometimes inaccessible language, which often clashes with its activist aspirations. Shull clearly hopes that her work will speak to the experiences of the migrants with whom she has worked, as well as have an impact on policy debates. Yet one wonders if her consistent use of phrases such as "imperialism," "revanchism," "racism," "anti-Indigenous," and the "carceral palimpsest" will drive away the very readers she most hopes to connect with and convince. This shortcoming is present at the outset, as she argues that the "Reagan imaginary" created a specter of Central American and Caribbean migration that was defined as "an anti-Black, anti-Indigenous, and heterosexual crisis of white nationalist reproduction" (2).

And such problems continue with passages such as "I define Reagan's Cold War on immigrants as a suite of new, counterinsurgent enforcement measures adopted by his administration during its first term that cemented in place a globalized crimmigration regime" (5). In another opaque sentence she argues that "as overlapping episodes of violence and erasure both characterized US imperialism and were foundational to the carceral palimpsest, Reagan would rely on these foundations to employ new tactics of erasure in his Cold War on immigrants at home and abroad" (107). Perhaps this tension is inevitable. After all, like many politically engaged scholars, Shull is attempting the difficult task of balancing the professional requirements of academic publishing against the moral imperative of calling out and confronting injustice. Nevertheless, such jargon can turn off specialists, to say nothing of lay readers.

A second shortcoming is the lack of a comparative framework for Shull's claims. "Prison camps are not exceptional, aberrations in US history," she declares. "Rather, they extend from the continued maintenance of a white settler nation—through the forced removal and disappearance of bodies deemed foreign and through the stories we tell that erase these histories" (15). Such an assertion certainly has a basis in historical evidence, but the racialization, repression, and removal of immigrants is hardly unique to the United States, and one wonders how exceptional she considers it. To be sure, Shull could reasonably respond that this lies outside of the scope of her study, but it is never entirely clear to what degree she considers U.S. immigration and border practices unique.

In a connected vein, she offers no background discussion of the deep and violent histories of racialized immigration exclusion in the nations from which many of these immigrants have come—particularly Central American countries, which have a long history of anti-Black and anti-Asian policies. This gap is related to the reductive and imprecise turn Shull's analysis sometimes takes. Consider, for example, her passing assertion that the United States has its origins "as a white settler colony" (15). Such a claim condenses and simplifies the rich work done by colonial historians over the past four decades.

Likewise, Shull's consistent use of "revanchist" to describe Reagan's policies is puzzling, as the term normally implies revenge or the desire to recover lost territory. Revanchism may indeed be a useful term for this study, but Shull never defines how she is using it. There are other distracting rhetorical excesses. In discussing the U.S. government's effort to repress and intimidate Sanctuary, for example, she refers to "the Reagan administration's total war on Sanctuary" (182). One wonders how that phrase slipped past her editors.

Finally, Shull's claims of ideological and policy continuity undermine her emphasis on the Reagan administration as the key to her argument, even as they will likely raise the eyebrows of more than a few fellow

historians. Take, for example, her interpretation of Jimmy Carter: “By adopting diplomatic and humanitarian language to obscure the racism in US foreign and immigration policy, Carter played a central role in developing language surrounding migration and asylum-seekers that avoided race—a politics of denial that Reagan would double down upon” (52). She goes on to assert that the U.S. response to the Mariel crisis in 1980 was part of a larger “continuity of an anti-Black undercurrent running through the Carter and Reagan administrations” (67). At the very least, such claims require greater engagement with the scholarship on the Carter administration.

Such critiques aside, Shull’s monograph represents the most complete and important study of Reagan’s immigration policies that we have available. It is essential reading for those interested in the history of U.S. immigration policy, as well as those interested in U.S.-Latin American relations more broadly. Although too dense for undergraduate assignment, it will make for rich reading for graduate students and other specialists, none of whom will now be able to regard Reagan’s immigration policy as relatively benign or Trump’s war on Central American migrants as a departure from previous practices.

#### Notes:

1. Joan Didion, *Salvador* (New York, 1983); Walter LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions: The United States in Central America* (New York, 1983).
2. Christian Smith, *Resisting Reagan: The U.S. Central America Peace Movement* (Chicago, 1996).
3. Greg Grandin, *Empire’s Workshop: Latin America, the United States, and the Rise of the New Imperialism* (New York, 2006) and *The End of the Myth: From the Frontier to the Border Wall in the Mind of America* (New York, 2019); María Cristina García, *Seeking Refuge: Central American Migration to Mexico, the United States, and Canada* (Berkeley, CA, 2006); Aviva Chomsky, *Central America’s Forgotten History: Revolution, Violence, and the Roots of Migration* (Boston, 2022).

### Author’s Response

Kristina Shull

I first want to extend my deepest gratitude to Jason Colby, Hardeep Dhillon, Danielle Olden, and Michelle Paranzino for their thoughtful and critical engagement with *Detention Empire*. I am honored by the opportunity to participate in this roundtable, and I would also like to extend special thanks to Andrew Johns and *Passport*’s editorial staff. SHAFR has been an intellectual home for me since I first presented work relating to this project at the SHAFR annual meeting in 2009 as a graduate student.

*Detention Empire* opens with two stories. One is about a hunger strike at an immigration detention facility in California 2017. Located in the desert outside of Los Angeles, the Adelanto Detention Center is one of the largest facilities in the United States. It is run by a for-profit operator, the GEO Group, which was one of the world’s first private prison operators and is today one of the largest. It was awarded its first contract to detain migrants by the Reagan administration in 1983.

In the spring of 2017, nine men who had been part of a Central American refugee caravan that arrived at the U.S.-Mexico border in search of asylum launched a hunger strike at Adelanto. They were met with swift retaliation—a brutal assault, solitary confinement, and for some, deportation. Their story is a microcosm of Sunbelt carceral geographies and patterns of resistance and retaliation in detention that I trace in the book and that have played out across decades. A coalition of actors inside Adelanto leading the strike and allies on the outside also introduces connections between

Caribbean and Central American asylum-seeking groups who have faced exceptional discrimination in the system since the 1980s. These events also raise questions about the role and impacts of activism on the outside.

The other story opening the book is my own. In 2007, in the same month I was accepted into UC Irvine’s Ph.D. program to work with Emily Rosenberg, my former husband was detained in a for-profit facility in New Jersey, then soon deported. For me, studying the history of detention has always been personal, as my own journey of loss and development as a scholar intertwined with the trajectory of the detention system’s continual growth over time. I am heartened by Olden’s assessment that this “only enriches the book,” as my difficulty in telling and situating my own story alongside those in *Detention Empire* raises other questions the book attempts to address about the relationship between trauma and historical silences.

Since 1985, migrant detention rates in the United States have increased a thousand-fold. By early 2020, 55,000 people were detained per day across a network of over 200 state and private-run facilities. Although the COVID-19 pandemic curbed detention numbers, which are again rising, it worsened already horrific conditions in detention and sparked a new wave of hunger strikes and a growing movement to #AbolishICE. Although abusive conditions in detention and at the border continue to make headlines across Republican and Democratic administrations, they always recede into a business-as-usual background. Interrogating how and why this came to be was a central impetus for writing *Detention Empire*.

Beyond the public, political, and policy impacts I hope the book might contribute to, my scholarly goals for the book are three-fold. The first is to expose the inner workings of immigration detention from the inside and show how it functions as a mechanism (or “workshop,” to borrow Greg Grandin’s term) of empire through the central role it plays in the manufacturing of migration crisis and public consent. The second goal is to bring scholars of immigration, race, war, and carceral studies into more conversations with each other by showing how immigration and foreign policy are mutually constitutive. And my third, overarching goal, as Dhillon writes, is to demonstrate “the role history has to play in the production of abolitionist frames.” Doing history, especially from within academic institutional spaces, is not the same as community organizing or activism, but mobilizing testimonies and addressing gaps in the archives can play a crucial role in what Colby calls “counterhegemonic action.”

I initially set out to tell the story of the rise of private prisons and why they emerged in the 1980s in an immigration context. I first consulted the Reagan Library in California and the National Archives in Maryland to seek a top-down understanding of the United States’ embrace of a policy of detention as deterrence in this era. As I researched, I began to support and organize with people in detention and communities facing deportation, and a larger story emerged “from below.”

I encountered patterns of resistance and retaliation in archival documents and news reporting from the 1980s that mirrored my own witnessing in real time in the 2010s. I was struck by how repetitive these patterns are across time and place. I saw a pattern of official lies emerge; I saw how detention was a site of solidarity and resistance, but also of silence. Yet I also began to see how top-level policy was shaped in direct response to acts of resistance and truth-telling coordinated by people in detention and “outside agitators,” as Reagan’s Associate Attorney General Rudy Giuliani dubbed them—including Jesse Jackson and people who collaborated with the Central American peace and Sanctuary movements.

I am humbled by the reviewers’ generous articulations of the contributions *Detention Empire* makes to immigration

and foreign policy history. They call it “the most complete and important study of Reagan’s immigration policies that we have available” (Colby); “a model of historical scholarship” (Olden); “indispensable” and “a project of the many U.S. empires—those at home and abroad—that elucidate the hierarchies of race, class, sexuality, and labor” (Dhillon); and “a must-read for anyone interested in the broader moral ramifications of U.S. foreign relations and the inextricability of foreign and domestic policies” (Paranzino).

I am especially glad about the reviewers’ recognition of my core argument that the Reagan administration played a formative role in weaponizing a raced and gendered migration crisis, which became a “template” for subsequent carceral expansion. *Detention Empire* gives, in Olden’s words, “sustained attention to the social, cultural, and political dynamics of anti-Blackness and its gendered and sexualized components.” And, as Dhillon adds, my “attention to Indigenous communities is a reminder for many of us that immigration history must remain attuned to Indigenous histories.” Reagan’s preoccupation with the political optics of the Mariel Cuban migration and with connecting the Caribbean to Central America underlines the anti-Black and anti-Indigenous core of Reagan foreign and immigration policymaking. This what I call the “Reagan imaginary,” which I define as “a vision and strategy of white nationalist state-making” that is “shaped by neoconservative politics, neoliberal economics, and long-standing mythologies of settler colonialism”(1).

I also appreciate the way Paranzino draws out the importance of the Caribbean Basin Initiative (CBI) in my analysis of Reagan’s embrace of neoliberalism. There was more than a mere profit motive behind the formation of new private prison industries (although that was surely present). The Reagan administration’s emphasis on “trade and aid” as a tool of migration control speaks to Reagan’s broader vision of a U.S.-led global capitalist order. The CBI also laid the less-recognized foundations of subsequent free trade agreements, namely the 1994 North American Free Trade Agreement and the 2004 Central American Free Trade Agreement, which reinforced U.S. economic hegemony while exacerbating the political violence and the displacement of migrants that such agreements were supposedly intended to alleviate.

Reagan’s establishment of the Haitian interdiction program and the CBI’s pairing of aid requiring participating nations’ cooperation with U.S. drug and immigrant interdiction efforts also served to expand off-shore enforcement efforts and were a blueprint for the 2010 Caribbean Basin Security Initiative, a cooperative security agreement between the United States and twelve Caribbean Basin nations. “Touted as a weapon against communism and a salve for wealth inequality,” I write, “aid has more often served as a vehicle for empire by accompanying counterinsurgent and military agendas” (22).

While I am not able to respond to all of the reviewers’ comments in full, they raise a series of key questions that are important to address. The first question is, how exceptional is the United States and its racist bordering practices? According to Erika Lee and other historians of immigration restriction in earlier U.S. history, the United States is the “global leader in the enactment of racist immigration laws.” Today it maintains the largest system of detention and deportation in the world.<sup>1</sup> Dhillon and Colby rightly suggest including more historical perspectives from the Global South and considering how anti-Black, anti-Asian, anti-Indigenous (and homophobic) governments and politics in Latin American nations also persecute and displace populations in the calculus of *Detention Empire*. I wholeheartedly agree that this is a limitation of my U.S.-centric project, and I continue

working to incorporate stories from the Global South in my more recent collaborative storytelling work on climate migration.<sup>2</sup>

That leads to the question of how exceptional the Reagan administration was and how much Reagan’s immigration policies departed from Carter’s. Here, the concept of *carceral palimpsest* is helpful, because it allows for an understanding of how under Reagan, some policies and practices continued from the past, others ramped up sharply, while others—namely, Haitian interdiction, private prisons, border militarization, and the systematic use of detention with an explicit intention to deter asylum seekers—marked a departure from the past.

Next, I acknowledge, as Colby points out, that there is an ongoing tension in my work between my use of less accessible language and terminology and my targeted audience and intended impact. For example, I align myself with immigration historians who argue, as Carl Lindskoog does in a recent article in the *Journal of American History*, that “immigration detention and other forms of incarceration are tools of state violence that have been used to advance ongoing projects of U.S. settler colonialism and racial empire.”<sup>3</sup> Taking for granted that these are the founding principles of our nation, I may lose some readers—especially undergraduates and general readers—without establishing this idea more intelligibly in my introduction, as Colby cautions. One way I have attempted to address this tension is by reading chapters or pages of the book with my undergraduate students and enlisting their feedback in making the book, and its terms, more accessible.

Terms that may require further unpacking include *revanchism* and *total war*. Colby claims that I do not adequately define *revanchism*, a term usually referring to a politics of revenge or attempts to regain lost ground. This is indeed how I intend the term to be understood in reference to domestic political trends. I was inspired not only by Jordan T. Camp’s use of it in *Incarcerating the Crisis* to refer to rising conservatism in response to the “crisis of legitimacy” the civil rights movement wrought upon the U.S. racial project, but also Dylan Rodríguez’s conception of the post-civil rights era as one of “White Reconstruction.”<sup>4</sup> As for *total war*, I define it on page 6 as “a bundling of counterinsurgent, covert operations, psychological tactics, and public relations vying for hearts and minds,” with a footnote explaining that I borrow the concept both from the language of the Sanctuary movement itself, which labeled Reagan’s offensive against them as a “total war,” but also from Kenneth Osgood, who uses the term in his work on the Eisenhower administration’s global Cold War propaganda campaign (6).

Paranzino also questions my use of *counterinsurgency* as an appropriate concept to apply to detention and, more broadly, border militarization. This is worthy of a lengthier discussion, and, as Paranzino recommends, deeper engagement with the genealogy of counterinsurgent warfare both in theory and on-the-ground practice. Although it can refer more specifically to foreign “internal-defense efforts” in military doctrine, I extend an application of it to immigration detention in much the same way Timothy J. Dunn applies the “low-intensity conflict” (LIC) doctrine to an immigration context in his 1996 book, *The Militarization of the U.S.-Mexico Border, 1978–1992*.

One example of LIC doctrine that is reflected in Reagan’s immigration enforcement efforts is his administration’s immediate revision of the Posse Comitatus Act of 1878. The original act prohibited military involvement in domestic crime control, but the 1981 Military Cooperation with Civilian Law Enforcement Act and Congress’s passage of the Department of Defense Authorization Act in 1982 allowed for a new merging

of military and local law enforcement cooperation.<sup>5</sup> Frustrations over prior Posse Comitatus law preventing military officers from suppressing Mariel Cuban unrest on military bases after the 1980 boatlift largely inspired this policy shift, which then enabled subsequent cross-agency cooperation in border enforcement and the formation of a militarized Border Patrol Tactical Unit (BORTAC) used to quell subsequent uprisings and hunger strikes in detention.

In *Detention Empire*, counterinsurgency can be understood as a tactic within LIC doctrine, alongside contingency planning; police, paramilitary, and military integration; the use of military bases to detain migrants; surveillance, intelligence, and special operations; and psychological operations—all components of Reagan's "total war" on immigrants. Yet I am especially preoccupied in the book with counterinsurgency as a rhetorical tactic, inspired by Ranajit Guha's theorization of how a "prose of counterinsurgency" operates to define and delegitimize enemies of the state.<sup>6</sup>

In response to Paranzino's question on whether U.S. officials viewed migrants as a potential counterinsurgent threat or whether their concerns reflected a more deeply rooted urge to protect the border against "undesirables" and keep America white, my answer is that both concerns were factors. The work that Greg Grandin, Carly Goodman, and Kathleen Belew have done on the Reagan administration's embrace of white nationalist think-tank immigration policy recommendations and paramilitary border vigilantism helps further establish the connections between the racial anxieties underlying counterinsurgent rhetoric and practice.<sup>7</sup> One example I discuss in *Detention Empire* is Reagan's classified Rex84 plan (short for Readiness Exercise 1984) to mobilize mass detention in the event of an insurgency of undocumented migrants and civilian war resisters in response to U.S. intervention in Central America.<sup>8</sup>

What lessons might be drawn from *Detention Empire*? What can readers and students see differently about the 1980s from the vantage point of detention, about the ongoing legacies of Reagan-era wars, including the global-migration dimensions of the War on Drugs and how they shape immigration debates today?

By showing how Reagan's rhetoric departed from reality, *Detention Empire* challenges persistent misperceptions among both the left and the right that Reagan was "soft" or softer on immigration than his successors. One important imprint of these histories on the present is how Reagan infused immigration politics with divisive narratives of "good" versus "bad" immigrants, especially through the criminalization and targeting of Mariel Cubans through their indefinite detention and in the War on Drugs.

Another takeaway is the importance of questioning current refugee rights and bordering regimes organized around state sovereignty. In this I am inspired by approaches in critical refugee studies that foreground migrant journeys and lifeworlds as subjects of critique and

include perspectives on decolonization and reparation. I am also inspired by the work of E. Tendayi Achiume, who "looks to the history and legacy of the European colonial project to challenge this status quo." Achiume calls for a different conceptualization of migration, "one that treats economic migrants as political agents exercising equality rights when they engage in "decolonial" migration."<sup>9</sup>

I do have a final *mea culpa* to offer: I wish I had done more to draw out environmental and climate connections that were emergent in my research in *Detention Empire*. One example is the Reagan administration's internal acknowledgement of how the "disequilibrium" of land distribution and a U.S. consumer demand for cattle exacerbated violence in El Salvador, leading the Department of Justice to emphasize the importance of disentangling "political reasons from demographic/ecological causes" in justifying Central American asylum denials.<sup>10</sup> In my current and future research, I examine detention as a locus of ecofascism and climate denial.

The U.S. government's recent labeling of the COVID-19 pandemic as a national security threat, as seen in mass expulsions under the Trump administration's enforcement of Title 42, and now, the Biden administration's continued asylum restrictions and warnings about the specter of climate migration-induced border crisis echo the pre-emptive logic of Reagan's Mass Immigration Emergency Plan. The rise of border militarism, in turn, has had grave implications for fueling climate crises and exacerbating the disparate impacts of climate change.

#### Notes:

1. Erika Lee, *America for Americans: A History of Xenophobia in the United States* (New York, 2021), 79.
2. See, for example, the Climate Refugee Stories project at <https://www.climate-refugeestories.com/>.
3. Carl D. Lindskoog, "Migration, Racial Empire, and the Carceral Settler State," *Journal of American History* 109, no. 2 (September 2022): 388.
4. Jordan T. Camp, *Incarcerating the Crisis: Freedom Struggles and the Rise of the Neoliberal State* (Berkeley, CA, 2016), 4; Dylan Rodríguez, *White Reconstruction: Domestic Warfare and the Logic of Genocide* (New York, 2021).
5. Elizabeth Hinton, *From the War on Poverty to the War on Crime: The Making of Mass Incarceration in America* (Cambridge, MA, 2016), 311; and Kristina Shull, *Detention Empire* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2022), 30, 115, 142.
6. Ranajit Guha, "The Prose of Counter-Insurgency," *Selected Subaltern Studies* (Oxford, UK, 1988), 45–84.
7. Greg Grandin, *The End of the Myth: From the Frontier to the Border Wall in the Mind of America* (New York, 2019); Carly Goodman, "Unmaking the Nation of Immigrants: How John Tanton's Network of Organizations Transformed Policy and Politics," in *A Field Guide to White Supremacy*, ed. Kathleen Belew and Ramon A. Gutierrez (Berkeley, CA, 2021); Kathleen Belew, *Bring the War Home: The White Power Movement and Paramilitary America* (Cambridge, MA, 2018).
8. Shull, *Detention Empire*, 145.
9. E. Tendayi Achiume, "Migration as Decolonization," *Stanford Law Review* 71, issue 6 (June 2019): 1509.
10. Shull, *Detention Empire*, 130.