

## (En)countering the Refugee: Capital, Óscar Martínez's *The Beast*, and the "Problem" of the Surplus Population

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### Introduction

According to the UN Refugee Agency, more than 65 million people around the world are currently displaced from their homes, spending their days in camps and makeshift shelters, navigating treacherous voyages through seas, mountains, and deserts in an effort to find some trace of home. As postcolonial scholars, how might we understand this phenomenon outside of the usual causal parameters suggested by a range of Western journalists and foreign policy "experts," who mainly focus on internal strife, war, the dictates of authoritarian regimes, and the collapse of governments in the Global South that have spurred the refugee crisis?<sup>1</sup> The question I want to explore is whether the dynamics of this crisis might be considered more productively if we view them through the lens of the contemporary moment in global capital: that is, capital's continuing need to generate and regulate a surplus population. How might this approach offer us a more productive path toward articulating a form of rights for a group whose numbers will only increase in the near future?

In attempting to answer these questions, I will first consider Marx's theories of surplus population and their relevance to contemporary capitalism, suggesting ways in which the current refugee crisis confirms or challenges capital's tendencies to add and shed labor. I will then focus on Óscar Martínez's *The Beast: Riding the Rails and Dodging Narcos on the Migrant Trail* (2010), a compelling account of the journey of Central American migrants across Mexico. My effort all along will be to analyze Martínez's attempt to highlight stories of suffering and injustice faced by these migrants, drawing attention to their lack of rights. However, I will also suggest that the text does little to explore what form these rights should take and how these rights can be negotiated within a larger imperial global narrative that is inextricably linked to the production and regulation of surplus populations.

Since Brexit, the election of Donald Trump, and the reinforcements (both legal and physical) of Fortress Europe, questions connected to the migration of citizens from the Global South to the North have reached a critical threshold. On the one hand, there are enough attempts through an array of texts—photographic essays, first-person memoirs, journalists' accounts of crossings, social media platforms, and films—that have made the migration experience "real"

for readers and viewers in ways that were not available, especially before the Syrian conflict.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, there are few attempts, outside the halls of academia, to understand the vast displacement of people within the context of the regulatory mechanisms of global capital.<sup>3</sup> Certainly, at some level, there is a general acknowledgment that war and civil unrest are fueled by Western policies and acquisitive trade “agreements,” but there is a tendency to attribute civil and economic chaos to longstanding internal failings. Moreover, there is little attempt to link even the most rudimentary geopolitical analysis to a sustained effort to understand the refugee crisis as imbricated in the capital accumulation process.

This analytical lacuna is reflected in the language that has been established to address refugees’ rights. Quite simply, the naming and managing of the crisis reveals the nature of the crisis itself. This point is most evident in the definition of refugee or displaced person itself. Michel Agier, for instance, traces the tortuous path of a Liberian *displaced person* in 2002–2003 as he traverses from this classification to *refugee*, *illegal*, *detainee*, *asylum applicant*, *held*, *sans-papiers*, to *tolerated* with every movement across manufactured and political borders (32). Agier compellingly demonstrates that “every act of naming and classifying is a political act,” and principles of classification produce “different modalities of recognition, responsibility or rejection” (33). All “categorizations of ‘refugee,’” Agier argues, “all asylum policies, are fluctuating realities in history and space . . . they basically depend on the attitude of the dominant power towards those countries that are dependent on them—politically, militarily or economically” (34). I would add that mere “attitude” is not the only issue here; what is critical is the measure by which these persons are connected to the requirements of the dominant countries’ labor markets. Consider, for instance, the resilience of the citizen/alien distinction in most Western nations. Arguably, as witnessed in the 2016 US elections, it persists partly because of the xenophobic nativism preached by politicians to firm up support among certain sections of the population, but it is also a distinction that enables the labor supply to be managed and regulated in specific ways.

As I will discuss later in this essay, these categories and classifications are used to police and regulate the needs of the home economy, as well as to keep a certain number of the surplus population in their native lands to fulfil the needs of transnational capital. Foreign workers, if they are granted asylum, are also often the first to lose their jobs and occupy the most precarious positions in society. Of course, the roots of the current migration crisis are deeply implanted in colonial structures of exploitation, but its present incarnation has its beginnings in the neoliberal era of military and trade policies that have systematically undermined the economies of countries in the Global South, creating a small wealthy class while impoverishing and dispossessing millions through trade and agricultural policies designed for the benefit of transnational corporations. It is no secret, for instance, that it has been the task of the Washington Consensus since the 1980s to systematically weaken, undermine, or overthrow any

government that has attempted to maintain some degree of autonomy. Seen most spectacularly with Afghanistan and Iraq in the last several years, Libya, Syria, and Yemen have also had to endure this bombardment. In the case of Afghanistan, the prospects of long-term strategic geopolitical gain and the possibility of immense mineral wealth will ensure US involvement for years to come.<sup>4</sup> The geopolitical mission is a delicate one, but it has definite goals. If trade pressures and sanctions do not work, the work of weakening these nations is accomplished through military means. Often the task is completed by US surrogates, such as Israel or Saudi Arabia.

Certainly, even if one focuses on the main areas from which migrants originate,<sup>5</sup> there is a discernable pattern of immiseration that has been fueled by the imperatives of capital. Not only have neoliberal military and trade policies devastated local economies in the Global South, they have also been responsible for dispossessing millions of people who are completely subject to the dictates of those very same policies, creating conditions that “provide the future airlocks of control and release for flows of undesirable populations” (Agier 212). Migration patterns, then, are strictly subject to the ways in which these airlocks are regulated, depending on imperial geopolitical maneuverings and the need to fulfil the imperatives of accumulation.

The Mediterranean refugee crisis, for instance, is exacerbated by the fact that US client regimes, such as Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates, maintain strict immigration and refugee quotas even as their economies depend on millions of exported workers from the rest of Asia who effectively work for slave wages with all their rights suspended.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, migration policies and the fate of refugees—indeed, even the fact of their being acknowledged as such—are central to relations between Turkey and the EU, internal relations within the EU, and Mexico and the US. The question I set out to address in the following analysis is how these relations both shape and are shaped by capital’s need to regulate labor, and how this understanding may provoke a new way to think about refugee rights.

My goal here is not to focus on the exploitation of the migrants during their journeys and the payoff of the refugee economy, so to speak. Clearly, many are benefiting from the multi-billion dollar refugee economy.<sup>7</sup> Nor am I only interested in the obvious fact that many migrants, both those with legal papers and those who are undocumented, provide vital labor needs in the metropolis; more crucially, I would argue that the refugee crisis must be seen as a necessary consequence of global value production, central to which is the need to create a surplus population. However, this population is a potentially destabilizing force for capital and creates a possibility where potential workers are not readily accessible for metropolitan capital. The current situation, then, represents both a crisis and an opportunity for capital.

## Marx and the Problem of the Surplus Population

Theoretically mapping the function of the surplus population within capitalism, Marx makes the point in *Capital, Volume 1* that,

capitalistic accumulation itself... constantly produces, and produces in the direct ratio of its own energy and extent, a relatively redundant population of workers, i.e., a population of greater extent than suffices for the average needs of the valorization of capital, and therefore a surplus-population . . . It is the absolute interest of every capitalist to press a given quantity of labour out of a smaller, rather than a greater number of labourers, if the cost is about the same . . . The more extended the scale of production, the stronger this motive. Its force increases with the accumulation of capital. (782–84)

There are two important points to glean from this passage: one is that the production of a surplus population is the inevitable result of capital accumulation. Second, that capital is only interested in productive labor, i.e. labor that adds to the total surplus, rather than a mass of labor. Value production, then, is not connected to actual population numbers. These observations raise some questions that are pertinent to the refugee crisis. How do refugees, the undocumented, and the stateless function as a part of this reserve army of labor which capital needs in order to discipline and regulate its working population? Are the increasing numbers in the surplus population an inevitable fact, then, given the accelerated accumulation process, and is the refugee population a contemporary manifestation of this stage of capital? At the larger level of the accumulation of total social capital, can capital regulate the balance between its need for super exploited labor, particularly in the Global South, with its constant need to shed labor? Does the presence of a large transnational pauperized population increase the risk for social upheaval, forestalling, in effect, the continuing accumulation process? How, in the end, do these questions help us unravel some of the complexities of the refugee crisis and posit a system of rights that may truly help the millions in crisis?

As Marx makes clear, capital needs a mobile labor force that is easily accessible in order to fulfil its needs, but this force also has to be strictly maintained and controlled:

Capital can only create surplus labour by setting necessary labour in motion . . . It is its tendency, therefore, to create as much labour as possible; just as it is equally its tendency to reduce labour to a minimum. It is therefore equally a tendency of capital to increase the laboring population, as well as constantly posit a part of it as surplus population. (*Grundrisse* 399)

Thus nation-states like the EU have to act as strict enforcers of immigration control even as they incorporate a necessary exploited migrant labor population. On the one hand, a certain number of workers have to be “exported” to fulfil capital’s needs in the metropolis<sup>8</sup>; on the other hand, a mass labor pool has to be maintained in the Global South, since these potential workers generate surplus at a higher rate and have access to fewer rights.

Let me now try to connect the dots and explore the ways in which an attention to the formulation of the relative surplus population might

help us better understand the refugee crisis. One of my goals in this essay is to emphasize that, while human rights advocates rightly highlight the appalling conditions and dangers faced by migrants, it is the task of postcolonial critics to stress that more must be done to underline the global chain of exploitation that leads to migration in the first place, as well as to ask what a discussion of the category of “relative surplus population” might have to offer. It is worth quoting Marx at some length on this point, since this would be the fulcrum around which we can and should discuss issues of migration:

The greater the social wealth, the functioning capital, the extent and energy of its growth, and, therefore, also the absolute mass of the proletariat and the productiveness of its labour, the greater is the industrial reserve army. The same causes which develop the expansive power of capital, develop also the labour power at its disposal. The relative mass of the industrial reserve army increases therefore with the potential energy of wealth. But the greater this reserve army in proportion to the active labour army, the greater is the mass of a consolidated surplus population, whose misery is in inverse ratio to its torment of labour. The more extensive, finally, the Lazarus layers of the working class, and the industrial reserve army, the greater is official pauperism. *This is the absolute general law of capitalist accumulation* (emphasis in the original). Like all other laws it is modified in its working by many circumstances, the analysis of which does not concern us here. (*Capital, Volume 1* 798)

Marx offers us a “general law,” but then adds the important qualification that the law is “modified” by “many circumstances.” What he so cogently offers here, of course, is not just a law but a repudiation of bourgeois political economy that relies on so-called natural laws of supply and demand, theories of overpopulation, and the apparent equalizing force of capital to demonstrate one of the central contradictions of capitalism: that the accumulation of wealth results in the increase of the industrial reserve army and, correspondingly, of the destitute. The creation of the surplus population is both an effect of the law of capital accumulation, as well as an imperative for its growth. It is this insight that is of importance to us as we consider our response to the current refugee crisis.

Marx makes the striking point that as the scale of production increases and the productivity of workers develops, “there is also an extension of the scale on which greater attraction of workers by capital is accompanied by their greater repulsion...The working population therefore produces both the accumulation of capital and the means by which it is itself made relatively superfluous; and it does this to an extent which is always increasing” (*Capital, Volume 1* 783). In short, as the organic composition of capital rises and productivity increases, capital sheds workers, creating in the process a surplus population, using and disposing of that population as and when they are necessary for further growth. The working population, then, has the paradoxical role of both helping capital accumulation while making itself superfluous, and the existence and size of this always disposable surplus population, at the same time, play a critical role in determining wages of existing workers.

Wages are not determined by the actual number of the working population, but “by the varying proportions in which the working class

is divided into an active army and a reserve army, by the increase or diminution in the relative amount of the surplus population, by the extent to which it is alternatively absorbed and set free” (790). Marx goes on to add that “every historical mode of production has its own special laws of population, which are historically valid within that particular sphere” (784). This observation is particularly pertinent since, as Marx reminds us contra Malthus, the size of the reserve population is independent of a general increase in population. In this particular mode the surplus population, Marx explains, is not just a product of capitalist accumulation, but fundamentally a necessity for accumulation to continue. This disposable surplus army is vital for capital to call up for “its own changing valorization requirements” (784). All the variables of capitalism, “periods of average activity, production at high pressure, crisis, and stagnation, depends on the constant formation, and the re-formation of the industrial reserve army or surplus population” (785).

This relative surplus population is not a homogeneous mass, but, as Marx points out, exists in three forms: the floating, the latent, and the stagnant. The first, who are at the center of modern industry, “are sometimes repelled, sometimes attracted again in greater masses, the number of those employed increasing on the whole, although in a constantly decreasing proportion to the scale of production” (794). This group increases and decreases as individual units are used up and disposed of rapidly and some of them emigrate as capital emigrates. The latent, meanwhile, are the products of the transformation of agriculture and the dispossession of the peasantry. This is a population that is in a transitional mode and is seeking a toehold in industry. Many are on the verge of pauperism. Finally, the stagnant class “forms a part of the active labour army, but with extremely irregular employment. Hence it furnishes to capital an inexhaustible reservoir of disposable labour power” (796). It is in many ways a constantly reproductive labor resource and “its conditions of life sink below the average normal level of the working class; this makes it at once the broad basis of special branches of capitalist exploitation. It is characterised by maximum of working-time, and minimum of wages” (796). The lowest element of the surplus population is the sphere of pauperism, which includes orphans and children, and those who are unable to work. Marx describes “Pauperism [as] the hospital of the active labour-army and the dead weight of the industrial reserve army. . . . It enters into the *faux frais* of capitalist production; but capital knows how to throw these, for the most part, from its own shoulders on to those of the working class and the lower middle class” (*Capital, Volume 1* 797). What is significant about Marx’s delineation of the surplus population is that it demonstrates how its existence is entirely tied to the requirements of capital, and that a large section of it is always disposable or in the process of being disposed.

Marx’s analysis of this population was limited to its function in the industrial center, particularly in England where the rural population was continuing to experience a ferocious rate of dispossession and displacement from the land. However, one hundred and fifty years

removed from Marx's reading of industrial England, we can still see how the ranks of the destitute, many of whom have been dispossessed of their agricultural land in the Global South, have swelled as more and more wealth has accumulated among the ranks of the few. In a vivid passage, Marx could just as easily be describing the maquiladoras along the US/Mexico borders or those economic "zones" that have sprung up in Vietnam, Philippines, and Bangladesh:

The misery of the agricultural population forms the pedestal for the gigantic shirt-factories, whose armies of workers are, for the most part, scattered over the country. Here we again encounter the system of "domestic industry" already described, which possesses its own systematic means of rendering workers "redundant" in the form of underpayment and overwork. (*Capital, Volume 1* 863)

This latent population is produced by the dissolution of pre-capitalist modes of production, but what we see more acutely in our time is how the categories of the surplus population have merged.

For instance, even while some of the refugees leaving Syria or Iraq may be from the so-called displaced middle class, vast disruptions have succeeded in creating populations in these countries that blend into all of Marx's categories of the reserve population. Millions are being "set free," or being disposed of, and the floating, the stagnant, and the latent are all potentially at the edge of, or drifting into, pauperism. Meanwhile, the border between so-called informal and formal labor is becoming even more porous, sharpening the cycle of exploitation. Consider, for instance, the following statistics from Afghanistan and contrast them with the rapid accrual of wealth in the hands of a few other sections of the Global South: in Afghanistan, "39.1% of the population lives below the national poverty line." ("Poverty in Afghanistan"; "Unemployment, Total"). The unemployment rate in Afghanistan was 8.5% in 2016<sup>9</sup> with many people who previously held steady jobs being "reduced to . . . competing with the chronically unemployed for a stint building walls or digging ditches" in recent years "as the formal economy shrinks" ("Afghanistan Unemployment"; Constable). Meanwhile, despite high rates of poverty in the so-called emerging economies, China currently has an increasing number of billionaires (319 in 2017), while India had a poverty rate of 21% in 2011 and currently has 101 billionaires (Schmitz; Dolan; "Poverty and Equity"). Quite simply, "Accumulation of wealth at one pole is, therefore, at the same time accumulation of misery, agony of toil, slavery, ignorance, brutality, mental degradation, at the opposite pole, i.e., on the side of the class that produces its own product in the form of capital" (*Capital, Volume 1* 799). What Marx is at pains to establish is that the accumulation process is relentless, that it reproduces the means by which it produces wealth. Thus, as capital accumulates, it continually exploits the laborer and indeed this exploitation only becomes worse over time. Meanwhile, the law of accumulation creates a reserve army in relation to the accumulation process that is itself dependent upon political factors, as we see in a country such as Afghanistan.

Let me now summarize some of Marx's key points that illustrate certain tendencies and even laws of the system and thus have a direct bearing upon how we may theorize the refugee crisis. Greater accumulation brings on an increase of the proletariat; competition will inevitably lead to monopoly: imperialism, or colonialism in Marx's case, will not remove the contradictions of capital but will just replicate them on a larger scale. Based on these conclusions, what do we make of the current explosion of the surplus population as the Global South endures the ravages of capital's universal reach? How might Marx's theories of the law of capitalist accumulation help us understand the process as it takes shape in the present? Is the fact that there are more displaced people in the world today—over 65 million (according to the UN Refugee Agency)—a fulfilment of Marx's theory, or a failure of capital's ability to regulate a surplus population for its own needs? If controlled and restricted migration is vital for the success of metropolitan capital, how might a population located indefinitely in refugee camps, detention centers, or en route to other countries stretch or challenge the accumulation process? As conflicts and wars continue to rise during the inevitably expansive and destructive process of capital accumulation, how might the increase in surplus populations undermine the accumulation process? Certainly, it is possible to claim that dispossession and the creation of latent populations or pauperism are nothing new. Indeed, writers such as Mike Davis and David Harvey have catalogued the impact of neoliberal policies since the 1980s, especially on the rural populations of the Global South.<sup>10</sup> Certainly, war and dispossession in the twentieth century is not an isolated phenomenon, and the existence of stateless or displaced populations characterizes, in many ways, the long twentieth century. Thus, one of the questions that needs to be addressed is, what is distinctive about this moment? Clearly, as Marx reminds us, we should not be distracted by an analysis that focuses merely on the number of the displaced. While the 65 million mark is a compelling figure, we might also want to question why mainstream observers and humanitarians fixate on this number rather than on the particularities of how and why this population is produced and regulated.

Our task as postcolonial critics, then, is to rethink the language and the terms of the debate we use to categorize the crisis. How much does our designation of refugees and of migrants reflect the fact that, for the metropole, the periphery's reserve army appears to arise "from the infirmities that 'naturally' characterize such economies" (Patnaik and Patnaik 51)? Instead, if we concur that capitalist development and relations in the West are dependent upon the existence of a super-exploited labor force and on the presence of a vast mobile, pauperized surplus population in the Global South, how might this reshape our reading of the current migration crisis? How might understanding the deeply layered connections between workers across the world formulate a more revolutionary concept of workers' and refugees' rights?



My analysis of *The Beast* will attempt to address some of these questions, as well as uncover what is useful in this text for drawing attention to the global refugee crisis; however, I will also suggest a more productive uncovering of the crisis. Paying attention to the crisis depicted in this text is particularly important, since the migrants in this case are not referred to or categorized as refugees. Yet, within the context of capital accumulation and the creation of a surplus population, the subjects of this text are very much in need of asylum and safety. I am hopeful that my analysis will allow us to frame strategies for reading texts that are sympathetic to the overall predicament of refugees and critical of existing systems that perpetuate displacement. Moreover, my reading may also offer ways to counteract hegemonic forms of reading that occlude the workings of political economy, developing in the process an analytical lens that lays bare the centrality of capitalist relations in any understanding of refugee narratives.

### *The Beast*

Óscar Martínez's *The Beast: Riding the Rails and Dodging Narcos on the Migrant Trail*, originally published in Spanish in 2010, catalogs the harrowing journeys of Central American migrants as they travel through Mexico, attempting to reach the border of the US. Martínez recounts how migrants are "kidnapped en masse by Zetas" [local gangs] and then "tortured, raped, and sometimes massacred" (Goldman xii). Capturing the lives of particular migrants in vivid detail, Martínez describes how "thousands upon thousands of migrants have been murdered in Mexico," and how "many others die by falling from [the train] 'La Bestia'; as many as seventy thousand, some experts estimate, lie buried along the 'death corridor' of the migrants' trail" (Goldman xii). Martínez is also scrupulous in showing the realities of the migrants' home countries. Many of the migrants are residents of El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala. These are nations that have been in the throes of long-term economic devastation, and Martínez's depiction of their lives is similar to descriptions of a war zone. "Those three countries make up the Northern triangle of Central America," he points out, "and the most violent region in the world according to their murder rate per 100,000 inhabitants" (271). He adds: "Central America is also one of the poorest regions in the Americas. It's estimated that almost half of the population of Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua lack sufficient money to cover their basic needs: eat well, live in a concrete house, have access to water and electricity" (271).<sup>11</sup> Not only are economic opportunities and jobs almost non-existent, it is almost impossible to exist outside the cycle of violence created by gang warfare and a militarized state. In the very first chapter, Martínez recounts the story of three brothers who join the ranks of the disposable surplus population: "The brothers felt the purgatory of their country, they felt the force with which their country

spit people out or dropped them dead (twelve murders a day with only six million people)” (19).

Martínez does not hesitate to indict systemic failures for the current situation, both within countries as well as at the macro level of global geopolitics. He highlights the imperialist role in precipitating civil wars in the region, explaining that these “civil wars [were] characterized by indescribable massacres perpetuated by elite army battalions, backed by US money, led by soldiers and generals who were trained at the US School of the Americas” (271). It is this fractured society, “left uncultured, with a generation that knew nothing else but how to take up arms” that produces the migrant crisis (271). He is also direct about pointing out the “airlocks” of immigration law, illustrating how they adapt to suit the needs of metropolitan capital. Unlike the present, for instance, the airlocks were loose at one point: “There are photographs from the 1980s in which migrants scaling the fence are received by Border Patrol agents in Santa Claus outfits. The Santas were handing out gifts to the kids, letting the migrants pass” (145). The links between immigration policies, the war economy, and the movements of global capital are encapsulated in the violent materiality of a border fence:

The shorter sections of the fence were constructed in late 1994 with scrap metal left over from the Gulf War. Broken tanks, downed helicopters, pieces of whatever material was blown to shreds while US missiles rained down on Saddam Hussein and his troops. It was in the new spirit of recycling: converting war trash into something useful, like a border fence. (146)

Although Martínez does not name it as such, these traces of imperial recycling are connected to the economic reverberations of global capital. Suggesting that the migrants are running not from “hunger—the most primal of human needs—but from resignation,” he points to the cycle of their daily grind as superexploited labor:

the miserable routine of waking up at five in the morning to travel two hours on a dangerous public transit system to get to a fast-food restaurant or a market or a warehouse in San Salvador, or in Tegucigalpa, or in Guatemala City, where they spend the whole day working away at undignified work only to return to their small homes, dog-tired, making a measly minimum wage that barely lets them afford beans and tortillas for their children. (272)

In addition to depicting the horrors of the journey North, which ends in death for thousands upon thousands, Martínez affirms that the chain of exploitation does not end with a successful crossing. Despite the success of some, he explains that while talking to undocumented workers in the US, most of the stories he “heard were of hardship, of brutal working conditions, of fear, of secret lives marked by the constant possibility of deportation, of the humiliation suffered because of the threats and scorn showed them by some American citizens” (273).

Martínez’s attention to these systemic issues inform his stories of the migrants. This attention is somewhat missing from Francisco Goldman’s foreword to the text, however, which appears to have been written for an audience that is invested in a narrative starring villains

and victims. Although Goldman mentions the fact that the United States “fanned the civil wars of Central America, supporting repressive governments, devastating those countries, and helping to create cultures of violence,” he is a little too willing to attach an almost primordial explanation for what happens to the migrants (xvi). His word choice focuses on “essential” human qualities. He alludes to the “predatory instincts” of the ranchers who were attracted by the profits that were to be gleaned from the migrants. In describing the book, he proclaims that “*The Beast* offers a terrifying lesson in human cruelty, cowardice, greed, and depravity” (xiii). In explaining why the book may not have been published initially in Mexico, he posits that “Perhaps because it holds up a mirror to a Mexico almost too depraved, grotesque, and heartless to believe” (ix). Goldman retains this language when he describes the book as a “series of pilgrims’ tales about a journey through hell (Even calling it hell seems like an understatement.)” (xviii), highlighting “innate” human deficiencies rather than the imperatives of political economy.

Martínez certainly does not shrink from describing the horrors of this hellish journey and even though his emphasis is on the migrants themselves and their stories, he is unrelenting in his determination to illustrate the utter disposability of the migrant reserve army. Their only function, as he consistently demonstrates throughout the book, is to serve as commodities that possess exchange value in terms of ransom money, while their needs furnish incomes for a whole chain of people throughout their journey, starting with those who sell them food to those who extort large sums of money to transport them across the country. To further emphasize the migrants’ dual role as both necessary commodity and disposable surplus, Martínez recounts, in a chapter called “The Invisible Slaves: Chiapas,” how women are trapped in brothels, their bodies “turned into a product” (72). Even though human trafficking in Mexico is rampant, he points out that “there are only three special Offices for Crimes Against Women and Trafficking of Persons” (80). Through it all, “the Mexican government” watches “with a disinterested gaze that tells us that not all humans are worth the effort, that there are some we protect and others we let suffer and die” (272). It is no surprise that the original title of the book (in Spanish) is *Los Migrantes Que No Importan*.

While there have been several accounts of migrants’ journeys to the US, few have so dramatically revealed the extreme horrors of the crossing.<sup>12</sup> Martínez is, for the most part, content to let the migrants speak for themselves, and he is at pains to show that their stories are worth telling, that the lives of these disposable people matter. Early on, he asks himself: “What kind of story, in Latin America, is another body on the street? Why even try to help? What’s there to say about people spit out of their own country?” (24). He provides a possible and modest answer in the last pages of the book, in the Afterword:

Good journalism has the ability to fulfill two basic roles: illuminating the darkest corners of our society so we can see what goes on in them; and making things more difficult for the corrupt, the abusive, and the merciless, so that things might become a little easier for the needy. (274)

As this passage might indicate, Martínez does not accede to any universal notion of rights, but he is well aware that the text will be imbricated in the discourse of rights. Thus he often comments on the question of rights, such as in an instance of a spectacle of “rights” that occasionally attempts to address the horrors that the migrants face. Referring to the headlines, “IN CHIAPAS THE HUMAN RIGHTS OF MIGRANTS ARE GUARANTEED” (capitalization in the original) in a local newspaper, describing a visit by chancellors from Guatemala and El Salvador who were putting on a show of military might to demonstrate their commitment to protecting migrants, Martínez highlights both the callousness and the corruption of government officials (35). Even the journalists and human rights organizations who take the stories of the migrants to courts rarely see justice (34). He is at pains to point out the ineffectiveness of rights organizations. The National Commission of Human Rights (NCHR) in Mexico, for instance, appears to have little power and even though they log several cases, they are woefully understaffed (93).<sup>13</sup> According to Martínez, they have “often reminded the state of what is happening, but the authorities continue to deny or simply not respond to official complaints” (94). And, pointing to a larger systemic problem about enforcing rights, he claims that “it’s almost impossible to file complaints of omission—that, for example, a government patrol passed the scene of an in-process kidnapping without lifting a finger” (103). Of course, most frequently, few migrants are willing to file a complaint “out of legitimate fear” (103).

Martínez does not pose as a savior; *The Beast* is not a story of redemption. While he always acknowledges the immense courage of the migrants, he is equally determined to demonstrate that little will change within the present system. Migrants will continue in their attempts to reach the US and yet most of these attempts will end tragically (273). Martínez does not offer a palliative for human rights activists, suggesting concrete steps that can be taken to address the abuse meted out to migrants. He does, however, acknowledge that he wrote the book to incite change, though it is unclear what this change might look like given that it would have to involve an almost revolutionary turnaround in the way governments and capital operate. One way to inspire change for Mexican readers, he suggests, is to “incite rage. Rage is harder to forget. Rage is less comfortable than compassion, and so more useful” (274). Surprisingly, he doesn’t choose to do the same for his US readers; instead, he hopes that the book “generates respect” for the “men and women who go through this hellish trial in order to wash your plates, to cut your grass, to make your coffee” (274). While respect is certainly due to a population that constitutes one of the most exploited classes in the US, there is enough reason to incite revolutionary rage and solidarity among US readers as well. Arguably, the entire narrative demonstrates how the imperialist chain of being, originating in the North, manufactures and contributes to the migrant tragedy. The need for a surplus army and the necessity of its exploitation, the disposability of large sections of a population,

the inextricable connections between Northern capital and Southern labor, and the militarization of economies and border policing, funded by Northern taxpayers are all causes for rage and revolutionary upsurge.

## Conclusion

While it is laudable that Martínez does not resort to frequently evoked liberal solutions like calling one's congress representatives to express concern, taking out petitions to revise laws, or holding Rights organizations accountable, he seems to hope for very little from his US readers. Perhaps this is a realistic appraisal of what a text can accomplish in the current political climate. However, the point I want to make here is not a generic one about the apparent power of literature or what a politically committed work might look like, but as my theoretical framework in this essay suggests, how we can benefit from viewing the migrant situation as an imperative of capital's need to produce value and maintain a surplus population. This approach, I suggest, may be a more useful reading strategy than a traditional human rights lens emphasizing tales of injustice and hardship. I am, of course, not negating the importance of the stories that Martínez relates nor am I minimizing the actual violations of existing human rights covenants; however, my suggested analytical method may wrench the crisis away from a narrative about hardship, determination, and ruination into a text that would elicit a new focus on a revolutionary construction of rights that are rooted in a systematic disruption of the way migrants are consigned to a fate of disposable, superexploited labor. Martínez is correct in imagining that there is little hope for change within the existing system. It is our task as postcolonial critics to lay bare the mechanism of this system and to link our formulation of rights to a larger imperial global narrative that is inextricably tied to the production and regulation of surplus populations.

## Notes

1. Some recent sources on this topic by journalists and foreign policy centers include the *European Council on Foreign Relations'* "Ten Home Truths on Europe's Refugee Crisis"; the *International Crisis Group's* "What's Driving the Global Refugee Crisis?"; Liz Sly of *The Washington Post's* "8 Reasons Europe's Refugee Crisis is Happening Now"; *Carnegie Europe's* "The Roots of Europe's Refugee Crisis"; *Chatham House's* "The EU's Crisis of Governance and European Foreign Policy" and "Refugees: The EU's Crisis within a Crisis"; and *Foreign Policy's* "America's Afghan Refugee Crisis."

2. Some examples include *TIME's* photo essay series, "Immigration in Europe"; *PBS News Hour's* Carey Reed and Kenzi Abou-Sabe's photo essay, "Migrants Share Their Most Cherished Belongings"; Reyna Grande's memoir, *The Distance Between Us*; Jonathan Dean's

memoir, *I Must Belong Somewhere: Three Men, Two Migrations, One Endless Journey*; *The Guardian* journalist Patrick Kingsley's book, *The New Odyssey: The Story of Europe's Refugee Crisis*; *The New Yorker*'s Tomas van Houtryve's photo series, "Europe's Migrant Trail, Through the Instagrams of Refugees"; and the film *Salam Neighbor*.

3. Academic texts on this topic include Mimi Thi Nguyen's *The Gift of Freedom: War, Debt, and Other Refugee Passages*, Peter Gatrell's *The Making of the Modern Refugee*, Ayten Gündoğdu's *Rightlessness in an Age of Rights: Hannah Arendt and the Contemporary Struggles of Migrants*, Wendy Larner and William Walters's *Global Governmentality: Governing International Spaces*, Daniel Thompson's "Risky Business and Geographies of Refugee Capitalism in the Somali Migrant Economy of Gauteng, South Africa," Daniel Faber and Christina Schlegel's "Give Me Shelter from the Storm: Framing the Climate Refugee Crisis in the Context of Neoliberal Capitalism," and Tom Vickers's *Refugees, Capitalism and the British State: Implications for Social Workers, Volunteers and Activists*.

4. As Mark Landler and James Risen of *The New York Times* write, "President Trump . . . has latched on to a prospect that tantalized previous administrations: Afghanistan's vast mineral wealth, which his advisers and Afghan officials have told him could be profitably extracted by Western companies."

5. According to the Pew Research Center, in 2016 nearly half of all refugees in the U.S. were from the Democratic Republic of Congo, Syria, Burma, and Iraq (followed by Somalia and Bhutan) ("Where Refugees to the U.S. Come From"). Eurostat shows that in the EU, the primary countries of origin for refugees in 2015 and 2016 were Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq ("Asylum Statistics").

6. According to *The Daily Sabah* in 2016, Saudi Arabia had "9 million employed foreign workers, followed by the UAE, Kuwait, Qatar, Oman and Bahrain with 4 million, 1.5 million, 1.1 million, 900,000 and 500,000 foreign workers, respectively" ("Gulf Countries Employ"). "The Gulf Labour Markets, Migration, and Population Programme (GLMM) records that in the most recent years of data collection, there were over 7,350,000 non-Saudi workers in Saudi Arabia (in 2016), over two million in Kuwait (in 2014), over 1,400,000 in Qatar (from 2006 to 2013), and over 2,200,000 in the UAE (in 2005) ("Demographic and Economic Module"). In 2014, Amnesty International published a report noting that the Gulf Cooperation Council had not pledged any resettlement places since the Syrian refugee crisis began ("Left Out" 3).

7. For example, Charlotte McDonald-Gibson writes that human smugglers made a profit of between \$3 billion and \$6 billion in 2015. Antony Loewenstein describes other ways in which companies and

individuals profit from the refugee economy: one Swiss company that runs immigrant reception centers made \$99 million in 2014, and refugees are overcharged at private housing firms, and some European citizens have even “seen an opportunity to turn a profit and are asking new arrivals for far too much money for water and to charge their smartphones” (Loewenstein).

8. After World War II, the British government invited workers to migrate from the Caribbean islands “to assist with labour shortages,” particularly in “jobs paying so badly that few whites wanted them” (“The Windrush Generation”). Likewise, after World War II migration to Europe from African countries (mainly Mali, Senegal, and Mauritania) increased, with small groups of migrants being “readily assimilated into the labor force” (Fassin). And during the war, “the Bracero Program brought Mexican Laborers to the United States to remedy wartime production shortages” (Abbot).

9. Though the unemployment rate is measured at 8.5% by *Trading Economics* in terms of “the number of people actively looking for a job as a percentage of the labour force,” several sources, including the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), *The Washington Post*’s Pamela Constable, and TOLO News, suggest that the unemployment rate in Afghanistan is much higher, around 40%.

10. Key titles include Mike Davis’s *Evil Paradises: Dreamworlds of Neoliberalism* and *Planet of Slums*, as well as David Harvey’s *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* and “The Right to the City.”

11. According to The World Bank, as of 2014 (the most recent data year), the poverty rate in Honduras was 62.8%, the poverty rate in El Salvador was 31.8%, the poverty rate in Guatemala was 59.29%, and the poverty rate in Nicaragua was 29.6% (“World Bank Open Data”). Other data from The World Bank show that as recently as 2015, 21.4% of Hondurans lived on less than \$1.90 a day (compared to 4.2% in El Salvador and 10.8% in Nicaragua) (“Poverty and Equity”). Furthermore, an article from 2013 by Zachary Dyer, “Central America Remains the Poorest Region in Latin America, Despite Success Reducing Extreme Poverty,” suggests that “16.4% of people in Mexico and Central America [were] extremely poor” while about half of the people in Latin America and the Caribbean were “surviving on less than \$2.50 a day.”

12. Recent accounts of refugees’ travels to the United States include *Fresh Fruit, Broken Bodies* by Seth Holmes, *Metropolitan Migrants: The Migration of Urban Mexicans to the United States* by Rubén Hernández-León, “A Syrian Refugee Story: Inside One Family’s Two-Year Odyssey from Daraa to Dallas” by Alex Altman of *TIME*, “The Journey from Syria” Parts One and Two by Ben Taub of *The New Yorker*, and “The Journey” by Patrick Kingsley of *The Guardian*.

13. This organization's website lists approximately one "recommendation for serious [human rights] violations" per year, but there do not seem to be larger statistical findings available from them. Other than this, there is one recent news article mentioning that the Mexico NCHR said that nine journalists had been killed in Mexico in 2017: <http://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/mexico-human-rights-official-reporter-target-49388346>.

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