



## The militarization of islands and migration: Tracing human mobility through US bases in the Caribbean and the Pacific



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### ABSTRACT

In this paper, we argue that the confinement of people on island military bases, whether narrated as humanitarian rescue, migration management, refugee resettlement, or militarized border enforcement, is an imperial process of ruination that impairs human possibility and erodes access to rights. Furthermore, the government's categorization of mobile people – as refugees, displaced, detainees, or migrants – informs the naming of these spaces, the bureaucratic and legal processes that they are subjected to, and their treatment (by local communities, federal authorities, the media, and the law). Empirical material is drawn from qualitative research conducted on US migration control in the Caribbean and Pacific. We identify spatial patterns of militarization operating across these sites, wherein migration is intertwined with enforcement, confinement, and militarization.

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### Introduction

Two persistent criticisms of President Barack Obama's administration were the ongoing imprisonment of 'foreign enemy combatants' on the United States (US) Guantánamo Bay Naval Base in Cuba and maintenance of historically high levels of non-citizen detention and deportation. These are seemingly disconnected issues, one concerning war powers and the other domestic policy. Both tend to be read as exceptional to American ideals of respect for the rule of law and inclusion. Yet historical examination of the basis – and bases (Vine, 2009) – of detention across US mainland and non-mainland territories reveals an intertwined history of militarization and "graded zones of sovereignty" embedded in imperial formations (Stoler, 2013, p. 8; also see Benton, 2010). Indeed, islands have long functioned as grounds for national projects of migration control and exclusion *through* enforcement and detention in remote locations where jurisdiction and lack of autonomy make legal status and asylum seeking complex.

In this article, we bring imperialism and militarization into contemporary understandings of migration control and border studies by centering islands and US territories in our analysis. We emphasize both the historical and spatial continuities at work on islands in the confinement of people and their mobility. Within litera-

tures on imperialism, colonialism, and empire, we observe the repetition of geographical patterns, including militarization, confinement, exceptionalism, and dispossession. Although processes of colonial and neocolonial control do not happen solely on islands, islands figure centrally in government efforts to control territory and human mobility (e.g., Bastos, 2008; Burnett, 2005; Kaplan, 2005; Lipman, 2012; Vine, 2009).

Taking a longer view of recent detention of asylum seekers on islands enables us to historicize two assertions that are frequently made in discussion of contemporary migration control practices and uses of islands. First, we demonstrate a long-standing connection between US military operations abroad and US immigration at home. We ground this argument especially in the discussion of the evacuation of Vietnamese refugees through Guam in 1975. Second, we show that military bases are located and maintained not only to exercise regional control, deter state aggression, and protect trade routes, but also to police the mobility of migrants and asylum-seekers. We ground this argument in the discussion of Haitian asylum seekers detained in the Caribbean in the 1980s and 1990s. In so doing, we extend work by scholars of feminist geopolitics who argue that greater attention be paid to finer scales and marginalized groups to understand international relations (e.g., Hyndman, 2004; Sharpe, 2004). This approach and these histories thereby provide insight into longstanding connections between US geopolitics and migration control efforts.

We accomplish our analysis by drawing on Ann Stoler's (2013) conceptualization of ruination, which we suggest enables careful inquiry into the relationships between colonial and imperial past

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