

# JLAG *Perspectives Forum*

Activist Scholarship  
in Latin America

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## Silent Killing: The Inhumanity of U.S. Immigration Detention

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I have never been a criminal nor a killer or a thief. But just because I am running from war in my country, does that make the reason I am in the prison for one year? After I am running from prison, from going to jail in my country? ... I feel so emotionally challenged and tortured and to me this is what we call silent killing. How can somebody escaping from prison and come to you to help him, and instead of helping him you arrest him and put to jail again?

—*Political refugee from Cameroon, detained in the Otay Mesa Detention Center, California (Figure 1; DALC, 2019a)*

EVERY DAY, HUNDREDS OF MIGRANTS and refugees from around the world arrive at the U.S.–Mexico border to ask for help. Yet instead of welcoming them into our nation, we lock them up. There are currently more than 38,000 men, women, and children being detained in more than 200 immigration detention centers spread out across the United States (Freedom for Immigrants, 2019). While some spend weeks in detention, others spend years.

In his most recent editorial, JLAG editor Johnny Finn (2019) argued that academics

could no longer maintain a detached gaze, given current conditions at our border. I concur. We can no longer remain silent as migrants are dehumanized and locked up in for-profit prisons; as children are put in cages and denied access to soap, toothbrushes, and even diapers; and as our colleagues and human rights workers are prosecuted in federal court for providing food, water, and shelter to people in need. We need to use our knowledge, expertise, and voices to stop the dehumanization and criminalization of migrants and their allies at our borders.

Over the past year, my personal outrage has pushed me to become deeply involved in developing a grassroots organization dedicated to providing financial and moral support to detained migrants and refugees in American immigration detention centers. This began over the summer of 2018, when the Donald Trump administration launched its zero tolerance policy at the border. In May 2018, Attorney General Jeff Sessions announced that the U.S. Department of Justice would begin prosecuting every person who crossed illegally into the United States, focusing particularly on migrants traveling with children. Before being overturned at the end of June 2018, this policy resulted in 2,600 children being torn from their families (ACLU, 2019). Many have yet to be reunited with their family members (Fetters, 2019).

After realizing that hundreds of these migrants and refugees were being locked up in the Otay Mesa Detention Center, less than twenty-five miles from our offices at San Diego State University, a small group of SDSU faculty and neighbors decided to take action. We began by sending letters of solidarity to thirty detained migrants and refugees who had been members of a recent Central American migrant caravan. Within a week, we received sixteen letters back from the Otay Mesa Detention Center. They told us that they needed money to pay for phone calls and to buy soap, shampoo, paper, pencils, and stamps. Others began telling us their stories, explaining how the violence in their home countries pushed them to flee in search of safety. Over the following weeks and months, we received hundreds of letters from migrants and refugees from El Salvador,

Honduras, Guatemala, Venezuela, Nicaragua, Colombia, Afghanistan, Cameroon, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, among many other nations.

Many also wrote to us about conditions in immigration detention. They wrote about forced labor, wage theft, medical neglect, contaminated or insufficient food, and lack of access to basic necessities, among other human rights violations. A letter from a fifty-year-old Guatemalan grandmother stated, "Well, each day the stay here becomes more unbearable. They keep the temperature intensely cold, our bones hurt. Meal times are irregular, the schedule is very variable, and the food isn't healthy. One official even said it was food for dogs" (Figure 2; DALC, 2018b).<sup>1</sup> She went on to describe medical neglect, an inmate death, and frequent miscarriages among migrant women at the Otay Mesa Detention Center. Many detained immigrants wrote to us about constant hunger, rotten food, discriminatory and racist guards, unsanitary conditions, and limited access to medical services. A Venezuelan photojournalist and political refugee locked up in the Etowah Detention Center in rural Alabama wrote:

I'm telling you, the conditions here are the worst I've ever seen and this is the truth. Remember that through my travels, I've come from countries where you would think this sort of thing only happens in the third world. . . . Recently, I've developed fungus on my feet because the shower is the most disgusting thing there is. My stomach hurts a lot and I'm beginning to suspect the

cause. Every day I see too many cockroaches and small insects. Even in the showers, as I mentioned, the wall's full of bacteria. I do not want to imagine—I shudder to think—that something like this could be happening in the kitchen department (DALC, 2019b).

Many implored us to share their stories and tell Americans about conditions in U.S. detention centers. A young gay El Salvadoran asylum seeker, who spent his nineteenth birthday the Otay Mesa Detention Center, wrote to us:

I would like the world to know that:  
 Migrants are the hope of our families  
 The hope of our countries  
 The hope for a better society  
 The hope for a better world  
 We are the hope that won't stop shining  
 We are the light that won't go out  
 We are strong in our journey  
 and strong in our lives  
 And we are not what President Trump  
 believes we are (Figure 3; DALC, 2018b).

Reading these stories and witnessing this first-hand testimony changed us. It was impossible to ignore the overwhelming need and the egregious state of our immigration detention system. As academics, we began digging into the literature to gain a deeper understanding of migration and detention in the United States. We followed the money to discover that many of our immigration detention centers are for-profit prisons being run by CoreCivic and Geo-Group, corporations whose stocks are publicly traded on the

New York Stock Exchange. In recent years, they've produced record profits for shareholders (Ferriss & Buiano, 2018). We also discovered that Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) is renting out space in rural county jails across the United States, where struggling communities are desperate for state funds. Some of these places are especially notorious for dire conditions, like the Etowah Detention Center in Gadsden, Alabama. *The Guardian* reports that at this prison, the goal is to “make your life miserable” (Shah, 2018). In fact, in 2018 the Etowah County Sheriff used a legal loophole to siphon \$750,000 from the state prison food budget (Domonoske, 2018). One of our letter writers, a political refugee from Cameroon, began his detention at the Otay Mesa Detention Center, but was later transferred in shackles to Etowah. As of this writing, he has been in U.S. immigration detention for 850 days. Since arriving at Etowah, he hasn't been outside in more than six months. He said, “I thought I was coming to the land of the free, but instead I came to the land of confinement” (Washington, 2019).

In the United States, prisons are lucrative enterprises. In 1994, the average daily population in immigrant detention was 6,785. By 2017, the daily population had exploded to more than 38,000. Meanwhile the annual budget for custody operations went from \$864 million in 2005 to \$2.7 billion in 2017 (Freedom for Immigrants, 2019). This is not just because of rising numbers of migrants and refugees at our borders. Rather, this is because prisons generate good money and entire communities depend on this revenue stream. At the Otay Mesa Detention Center

Hi Chris,

Greetings and happy to hear from you again and I am also happy to hear that, your Spanish studying is improving. please Chris, if you don't hear from me again know that it's because of my health condition in this place. I am passing through a lot of stress and I have a very bad condition of [REDACTED] because of the stress and some times when I think about my life I feel so disturb and so challenging because, I am a young man of 36 years but I am already having issues with [REDACTED] then how do you think my life is going to end like? you see Chris, when I think about this things it makes me feel so different. because I have never been a criminal nor a killer or a thief but just because, I am running from war in my country does that makes the reason why I am in the prison for one year [REDACTED]? After I am running from prison from going to jail in my country. So Chris, hahahaha I am so confuse now and I don't even know ~~the~~ what to do. I feel so emotionally challenge and disturbed and to me this what we called silent killing. How can some body escaping from prison and come to you to help him end instead of helping him you arrest him and put to jail again? I'm confuse I don't know what to do. Thanks for the organizing team for detainee allies to carry our voices into the hall of power-meeting with the staffers and we pray that God should help launch them to listen to our prayers. Stay blessed and extend my greetings to others.

Bye, [REDACTED] [REDACTED]

**Figure 1.** Letter from a Cameroonian political refugee detained at the Otay Mesa Detention Center (DALC, 2019a).

Dic. 03 - 2018

Sr. R. [REDACTED]

Dios le bendiga a su amable generosidad.

Soy: O [REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED], de nacionalidad guatemalteca, de 50 años de edad vinimos con mi hijo [REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED] de 24 años, mi nuera [REDACTED] [REDACTED] de 24 años, mi nieto [REDACTED] [REDACTED] de 3 años y hace 6 meses nació mi segundo nieto, [REDACTED] [REDACTED], quien ya sería ciudadano americano.

Vinimos el [REDACTED] 2017, dejando todo en manos de desconocidos, por la emergencia del - cual mi familia no pudo recuperarlo y se nos ha advertido que no podemos regresar a nuestro país.

...

Pres la estadía acá cada día se vuelve insoportable - nos ponen el clima intensamente frío, nos duelen los huesos, los horario de comida son irregulares sus horarios son muy variables y la comida no es saludable, que dijo un oficial que era comida para perros y al agua le hechan un medicamento si tienes un fuerte dolor no te atienden tiene uno que anotarse el siguiente día a en - fermería para que la enfermera determine 2 ⇒

...



Si es factible que un médico le atiendan y las dietas son pésimas. y cuando vamos a comer a los 5 minutos ya comienzan a gritar bestia y cuando lo chequean a uno físicamente algunas oficiales lo hacen bruscamente y a veces le dicen aver que te tragiste y en horas de la noche le gritan a uno y solo viven amenazando que nos van a poner un rayón y algunas dicen que no se fientan el alma para mandarnos al hoyo (al area de castigo)

Hay oficiales que le gritan llamandole a uno la atención enfrente de todas y lo hacen en ingles y si uno quiere explicarle dicen que no saben español y le gritan que es una falta de respeto dicen que viene uno hacer aca, lo ven con asco y menosprecio.

...

Tambien tengo mucha tristera porque aca murio la señora [REDACTED] y estaba enferma del corazón yo me comuniqué con su hija, hay muchas que han perdido sus bebes de las que vienen embarazadas.

Bueno hay más cosas pero espero en Dios les llegue esta carta ya que las leen y ellos deciden si las envian o no, favor de notificarme si les llego por favor, les envio la informacion mi X de mi hijo y gracias por su atencion

**Figure 2.** Excerpts from a letter written by a fifty-year-old Guatemalan woman detained at the Otay Mesa Detention Center (DALC, 2018a).

Hola Kimberly

Mi nombre es [REDACTED] Soy un joven de 19 años fue muy duro para mí ya que al cumplir los 19 años el día [REDACTED] de mayo del corriente año fue muy difícil ya que ese día fui detenido en el centro de detención Otay Mesa Soy de nacionalidad Salvadoreña soy muy estudioso y trabajador en El Salvador estude hasta 3 año bachillerato técnico Contador especializado en: Asistente de Contador y Administración de Empresa

Yo llegue a la frontera el Chaparral con la Caravana ya que yo no conocía México y esta es mi primera vez en los Estados Unidos. hui de El Salvador por la violencia y la discriminación que se vive a diario y por la falta de apoyo a los jóvenes, y no vine con familia

Quisiera que el mundo sepa que

" Los Migrantes Somos:

- la esperanza de nuestras familias
- la esperanza de nuestros Países
- la esperanza de una mejor Sociedad
- la esperanza de un mejor mundo
- Somos la esperanza que no para de brillar
- Somos una luz que no cesa de iluminar

Caminos, fuerzas y sobre todo

♥♥♥ Vidas ♥♥♥

Y no somos lo que el predicante temp Cree

Quisiera que el mundo sepa eso no importa como se publique es mas puede llevar toda mi informacion hasta mi fotografia lo que quiero es hacer conciencia de que nosotros como migrantes no somos en peligro para una Sociedad

Mi experiencia como detenido es muy dura pero estoy dispuesto a recibir por que no hay otra opcion porque tengo miedo volver a mi pais.

¿puedes recibir visitas? si puedo recibir pero no tengo quien me visite ¿puede hacer llamadas? si puedo hacer llamadas en la localidad ¿Dan Cuidado Medico? se dan Cuidado medico pero hay doctores muy enojados ¿Es suficiente Comida? ¡NO! es muy poca Comida que dan y la Comida que recibimos a veces esta en mal estado sobre todo: tortillas de harina, ensaladas y bebidas y la Comida es de mala Calidad ¿Lo tratan con respeto? ¡NO! en este Centro de detencion hay muchos oficiales que son muy agresivos a contestar y pedir como hace poco un compañero recibio un trato muy agresivo, y nosotros no nos merecemos eso

Gracias por todo Kimberly por escribir ya que tus palabras han dado animo a mi vida gracias por todo te mando muchos besos, una lluvia de abrazos y un diluvio de bendiciones gracias por todo gracias por ser mi familia

Atentamente: [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

**Figure 3.** Letter from an El Salvadoran LGBTQ asylum seeker detained at the Otay Mesa Detention Center (DALC, 2018b).



in California, ICE uses taxpayer money to pay CoreCivic approximately \$2.8 million per month to rent bed space for detained migrants and asylum seekers (Becerra, 2019). Meanwhile, in the first quarter of 2019, CoreCivic recorded a net income of \$49.3 million, up 31 percent from the same quarter a year before (Global News Wire, 2019).

To document this troubling moment in American history, we realized that we needed to make these letters public. The voices of migrants and refugees in detention are often hidden from public view. Yet here we have hundreds of detained migrants pleading to have their voices heard. We decided to donate our growing letter collection to the SDSU Special Collections and Archives to preserve these voices for posterity. After being redacted for privacy and confidentiality, these letters now live in a digital archive that is open and accessible to the public.<sup>2</sup> We hope this archive will become an important tool for education and research, as students and researchers use it to learn about the lives of migrants and refugees being detained in their own backyards.

We also used our scholarly training to reach out to policy makers across California and the nation. In early 2019, we presented a policy report to California's Attorney General Xavier Becerra, along with other state- and municipal-level politicians. We contacted the media, to amplify the voices of migrants and refugees held in U.S. immigration detention and received international coverage for our work (Moran, 2019; Pettit, 2019; Robbins, 2019). We worked with the California Faculty Association (CFA) to push our California State University pension system, CalP-

ERS, to divest from private prisons. This movement continues to gain momentum, especially since the CFA adopted a formal resolution in April 2019 calling on CalPERS to drop private prisons from its investment portfolio (CFA, 2019). We have also participated in stakeholder tours of Otay Mesa Detention Center in an effort to keep this facility accountable for its actions.

Since we began writing letters last summer, we've grown into a more than 250-member grassroots organization called Detainee Allies. Through word-of-mouth fundraising, we've donated over \$20,000 to detained migrants' commissary and phone accounts. As of August 2019, we've received more than 1,300 letters from over 600 migrants and refugees who have fled from more than forty nations around the globe. Many of these letter-writers have expressed deep gratitude for our moral and financial support. A Nicaraguan political refugee wrote to us on the verge of his deportation to say, "I want you to know that your help is a pillar for many of us who are experiencing this unjust detention" (DALC, 2019c).

One year later, I would like to say that the situation has gotten better and that our advocacy has improved conditions for migrants and refugees at our border. Yet, children are still being separated from their extended family members to be detained in overcrowded cells at the border, and denied access to basic necessities (Dickerson, 2019). Between October 2018 and June 2019, six migrant children have died in federal custody (Hennessy-Fiske, 2019). Some are likening the detention of migrants and refugees in America to concentration camps (Katz,

2019). During a recent stakeholder tour at the Otay Mesa Detention Center, I interviewed two men, one from Cameroon and the other from Benin, who spoke of abysmal conditions at the Customs and Border Protection Port of Entry in San Ysidro, California. The young political refugee from Cameroon was in a solitary, windowless *hielera* or “ice box” for fourteen days, with twenty-four-hour fluorescent lighting and only a foil blanket and a thin mat to keep warm. The other man spent twenty-two days in a *hielera*. He said, “No human being should ever be treated that way.” Each week, we receive another thirty letters from migrants and refugees in detention; these types of reports are increasingly common.

In America, our political system dehumanizes migrants and refugees. When President Trump and his supporters speak about southern invasions of perceived “rapists,” “bad hombres,” and “thugs,” they are motivated

by a xenophobic fear of the unknown “other.” Migrants are cast as dangerous threats to national security, which legitimizes their criminalization and exclusion, and the erosion of their rights (Mountz & Hiemstra, 2014). This, in turns, justifies the inhumane treatment of “illegal aliens” within our borders. We lock them up in concrete boxes, coerce them into \$1-a-day work programs, deny them adequate food, silence their dissent, and deny them dignity as human beings. This is the inhumanity of our immigration detention system. Rather than help asylum seekers at our borders, we choose to profit from their suffering instead.

Many, perhaps most of us, have been trained to remain apolitical in our work. We no longer have that privilege. We must use our skills and knowledge to speak out for what we believe in. For Latin American geographers, there is so much work to be done.

## NOTES

1 All Spanish translations are my own

2 The SDSU Detainee Allies Letter Collection is accessible here: <https://digitallibrary.sdsu.edu/islandora/object/sdsu%3AOtayMesaDetentionCenter>

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