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Destitution Economies: Circuits of Value in Asylum, Refugee, and Migration Control

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In this article, we argue that destitution economies of migration control are specific circuits of exchange and value constituted by migration control practices that produce migrant and refugee destitution. Comparative analysis of three case studies, including border encampment in Thailand, deprivation in U.S. immigration detention centers, and deterrence through destitution in the United Kingdom, demonstrate that circuits of value depend on the detachment of workers from citizenship and simultaneously produce both migrant destitution and new forms of value production. Within destitution economies, migration and asylum's particular juridico-political position as domestic, foreign, and securitized allows legal regimes to produce migrants and asylum seekers as distinct economic subjects: forsaken recipients of aid. Although they might also work for pay, we argue that destitute migrants and asylum seekers have value for others through the grinding labor of living in poverty. That is, in their categorization as migrants and asylum seekers, they occupy a particular position in relation to economic circuits. These economic circuits of migration control, in turn, rely on the destitution of mobile people. Our approach advances political geographies of migration, bordering, and exclusion as well as economic geographies of marketization and value, arguing that the predominance of political analysis and critique of immigration and asylum regimes obscures how those regimes produce circuits of value in and through law, state practices, and exclusion. Furthermore, law, state power, and forced mobility constitute circuits of value and marketization. Conceptualizing these migration control practices as destitution economies illuminates novel transformations of the political and economic geographies of migration, borders, and inequality. *Key Words: borders, circuits, destitution, migration, poverty, value.*

本文认为, 在因移民管制致贫的经济体中存在一个特殊的交换和价值循环, 其中的移民管制措施就是造成移民和难民贫困的原因。作者对三个案例研究进行了比较分析: 泰国的边境难民营, 美国移民拘留中心内的物资匮乏以及英国的贫困所产生的严重负面影响。比较结果显示, 价值循环是通过剥夺工人的公民身份实现的, 同时它也会产生移民贫困和新价值的生成形式。在贫困经济体中, 移民和政治庇护寻求者在国内外以及安全方面所具有的特殊司法政治地位, 让移民和寻求庇护者在法律体系中成为一个独特的经济主体: 被遗弃的援助接受者。尽管他们也可能工作并获得报酬, 但我们认为贫困的移民和寻求庇护者为他人提供价值的方式, 就是在贫困中进行艰苦的工作。换言之, 他们作为移民和寻求庇护者的身份, 让他们在经济循环中占据了特殊的地位。反之, 移民控制的经济循环也依赖于流动人口的贫困。我们的分析方法进一步探讨了移民, 边境和排斥的政治地理以及市场化和价值的经济地理, 我们认为占主导力量的政治分析和对移民与庇护制度的批判, 掩盖了这些制度如何通过法律, 国家实践和排斥产生价值循环。此外, 法律, 国家权力和强制流动构成了价值和市场化循环。将这些移民控制实践在概念上视为贫困经济, 显示出了在移民, 边界和不平等政治和经济地理方面出现的新转型。 *关键词: 边境, 循环, 贫困, 移民, 贫穷, 价值。*

Sostenemos en este artículo que las economías misérrimas del control de migraciones son circuitos específicos de intercambio y valor constituidos por las prácticas de control migratorio que generan miseria para migrantes y refugiados. El análisis comparativo de tres estudios de caso, que incluyen la reclusión fronteriza en campamento en Tailandia, las privaciones de los centros de detención de inmigración americanos y la

política de disuasión por la expectativa de miseria en el Reino Unido, demuestran que los circuitos de valor dependen del desapego de los trabajadores a la ciudadanía y simultáneamente producen tanto miseria del migrante como nuevas formas de producción de valor. Dentro de las economías de la pobreza, la particular posición jurídico-política de la migración y del asilo, que se asume como doméstica, extranjera y objeto de consideración en términos de seguridad nacional, permite regímenes legales que pueden catalogar a migrantes y buscadores de asilo como distintos sujetos económicos: receptores desamparados de ayuda. Si bien podría ocurrir que ellos trabajen por paga, argüimos que los migrantes pobres y los peticionarios de asilo tienen valor para otros a través de la agobiante brega de vivir en la pobreza. Esto es, en su categorización como migrantes y buscadores de asilo, ellos ocupan una posición particular en relación con los circuitos económicos. A su turno, estos circuitos económicos de control migratorio dependen de la miseria de la gente móvil. Nuestro enfoque avanza en las geografías políticas de la migración, los asuntos fronterizos y la exclusión, lo mismo que en las geografías económicas del mercadización y el valor, arguyendo que el predominio del análisis político y crítica de la inmigración y los regímenes de asilo oculta el modo como esos regímenes producen circuitos de valor en y a través de la ley, las prácticas estatales y la exclusión. Adicionalmente, la ley, el poder del estado y la movilidad forzada constituyen circuitos de valor y la economía del libre mercado. Conceptualizar estas prácticas de control migratorio como economías de la miseria ayuda a aclarar las transformaciones novedosas de las geografías políticas y económicas de migración, frontera y desigualdad. *Palabras clave: circuitos, fronteras, migración, miseria, pobreza, valor.*

In this article, we argue that destitution has become a technique of political exclusion and valuation in migration control regimes and, more specifically, that destitution economies exclude to make migrants valuable to others in their exclusion from political membership, work, and rights. By connecting recent literature on relational poverty, changing political geographies of migration, and the circuits of value produced by state control practices, we contribute an original approach to emerging trends in immigration, asylum, border policing, and refugee resettlement. Transformations in global capitalism continue to produce creative mechanisms of exclusion and forms of inequality, surplus populations (Gidwani and Reddy 2011), forms of abandonment (Povinelli 2011), and expulsions (Sassen 2014) now visible in the wake of these changes. Although precarity is endemic to contemporary global capitalism (Mahmud 2014), migrants' sociolegal status(es) generate particularly precarious material formations (Lewis et al. 2015) and conditions of unfree labor in detention (Bales and Mayblin 2018). Taking three different cases in turn, we argue that immigration and asylum regimes rely on a multiplicity of economic relationships that are more deeply rooted and entangled than previous studies of political economies of migration control, detention, and borders have explored. As our case studies show, destitution has become an important enforcement tool that reworks the actually existing circuits of value in asylum markets—and how we understand value and circulation more broadly.

In this article, we argue that destitution economies of migration control are specific circuits of exchange and value constituted by migration control practices that produce migrant and refugee destitution. As we go on to show in our three case studies, destitution economies of migration control hinge on spatial practices of containment, mobility, and legal categorization that produce destitution's dependence, vulnerability, and impoverishment. Although migrants and refugees¹ are economic actors in their own right, we emphasize the economies emerging around public–private arrangements of care and control. These economies do not, we contend, operate according to the same neoliberal market logics that govern social service privatization, nor do they presume citizen-worker subjects like national economies do (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013). Our case studies show, rather, that refugees and migrants become valuable in their enclosure, dependence, and vulnerability, precisely not in their self-sufficiency, resilience, and entrepreneurship. More to the point, migrants' and refugees' sociolegal status makes them valuable as rightless, detainable, and excludable. We argue that migration and asylum's particular juridico-political position as domestic, foreign, and securitized allows legal regimes to produce migrants and asylum seekers as distinct economic subjects: destitute recipients of aid. Although they might also work for pay, we assert that destitute migrants and asylum seekers produce value for others through the grinding labor of living in poverty. That is, in their categorization as

migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers, they occupy a particular position in relation to economic circuits. These economic circuits of migration control, in turn, rely on the destitution of mobile people.

The article first draws on recent research on relational poverty and (hyper)precarity to situate our approach to destitution. We argue that destitution implies not only impoverishment but also an enforced dependence on others for the means of survival. Next, we present our conceptualization of destitution economies of migration control to explain how migrants' legal othering, impoverishment, and dependence become valuable to a range of actors. After discussing our comparative methodology, we trace the circuits of value that produce destitution economies in three distinct contexts: special economic zones adjacent to Thai refugee camps, dispossessions experienced in the U.S. detention and deportation system, and cashless support for refused asylum seekers in the United Kingdom. We close by discussing how migration control's destitution economies push geographers to think differently about how economies are composed through the political geographies of migration, poverty, and borders.

Literature Review

Destitution

In this article, we understand *destitution* to refer to a material and discursive configuration that is constituted of extreme impoverishment and dependency on others for the means of survival. Our framing of destitution is related to both emerging work on relational poverty and expanded notions of precarity. We maintain that destitution is best understood as relational, as Elwood, Lawson, and Sheppard (2017) framed geographical studies of poverty: For them, raced, classed, and gendered difference constitute the framing of poverty as a problem, its possible range of solutions, and how the success of solutions gets measured. Elwood, Lawson, and Sheppard (2017) approached poverty not as a fixed thing happening in a discrete space and time but rather as produced through material and discursive configurations that operate simultaneously at multiple spaces and times in and beyond territorially bounded spaces. For us, a comparative approach is necessary to highlight the production of destitution economies as similarly variable, yet

related, configurations at multiple scales, times, and "socio-spatial expressions" (Elwood, Lawson, and Sheppard 2017, 751). Although destitution might adopt a similar relational conceptualization and might fall under the wider umbrella of studies of poverty, we maintain that destitution and poverty are not identical. Many define destitution as a "state of poverty" (e.g., Gopinath 2014, 342), but for us destitution involves a state of not simply impoverishment but also dependence—a poverty so extreme that not only do people lack the means to provide for themselves but others must provide for them. Here, we understand destitution as the forsaking of migrants as economic subjects, the idea of a deprivation so fundamental that it can only be survived through dependence on others. As we go on to argue, this dependence takes a particular form for refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants excluded from (legal) employment and reliant on humanitarian organizations and state agencies for survival. These relations of dependence reduce migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees to biological reproduction and need, limiting their political subjectivity to victims and aid recipients.

These relations of dependence share striking similarities with forms of vulnerability and exploitation explored in a growing body of scholarship on precarity. Precarity emerged from discussions within labor studies about emerging groups of workers who faced "conditions of vulnerability relative to contingency and the inability to predict" (Ettlinger 2007, 320). More recently, geographers have explored spatial approaches that draw on Butler's (2009) understanding of precarity as being unevenly distributed, differential exposure to violence (Lewis et al. 2015; Waite and Lewis 2017). Dependency becomes a key way in which conditions of poverty, injustice, and vulnerability linked through conceptualizations of precarity are perpetuated: As Harker (2012) wrote, "The ways in which one's life is dependent on the lives of others" (859) are foundational to precarity. Moving beyond an explicit focus on labor has also allowed geographers to concretely link precarity with socio-legal status (Lewis et al. 2015; Burrige and Gill 2017). This approach is key to understanding law's vital role in producing destitution via the malleability or selective appropriation of legal categories by what Coutin et al. (2017) termed the "discretionary state." In our conceptualization, destitution involves not only a state of dependence and legally produced vulnerability but also extreme impoverishment.

We use the term *destitution* rather than *poverty* or *precarity* because the term signifies a connection between extreme impoverishment and dependency on others. Destitute migrants face different sets of risks than do other impoverished populations (Bloch 2014) and face expectations of behaving as eventual citizens even as they are stripped of the ability to do so. Enforced destitution in the UK context has been framed as contrary to the UN Refugee Convention's promise of economic and social rights and as a wider international human rights issue of concern (Cholewinski 1998). The way in which destitution has become fixed to a specific legal meaning in the UK context is unlike how it is defined or approached in other areas of the world, but it is similar to our use of the term: In the United Kingdom, being destitute means extreme impoverishment that requires dependency on state or charities' assistance. Our third case study explores this juridical–institutional context to understand how the legal codification of destitution enables the revaluation of refused asylum seekers as data producers and performative deterrence. Like Gopinath (2014), we argue that beyond the United Kingdom, destitution has the advantage of being a term that is rarely institutionalized. Furthermore, its flexibility across variable sociospatial arrangements and temporal or spatial scales best articulates the mode of governance we explore here.

Destitution Economies

Migration has long been governed through state economies, particularly through labor market policies. Political economies of migration are a well-established field, covering macroeconomic analyses of migration's contributions to national and local tax revenue, labor market shortages, and investment (e.g., Fitzgerald, Leblang, and Teets 2014). The field of migration and migration as development similarly tracks the relationship between migration, remittances, and changes in sending societies (e.g., Gamlen 2014). Sociologists and anthropologists have long documented migrants' economic practices, particularly where migrants are not granted access to banks and financial products. Lending and remittances are organized in many different ways, with greater and lesser visibility to states, depending on histories of migration, settlement, and enduring translocal relationships (Cross 2015). Islamic finance has received growing attention, as migrant workers use non-interest-bearing institutions to transfer

money (Pollard and Samers 2013). Migration itself is often presumed to be an economic practice, and political framings of migration frequently move between “deserving” hard-working, tax-paying migrants and “undeserving,” migrants who either work too much (stealing jobs) or too little (abusing public benefits).

There is a burgeoning interdisciplinary field interrogating economies of migration control and a litany of neologisms describing these economies: the migration industry (Gammeltoft-Hansen and Sorensen 2013), immigration industrial complex (Fernandes 2007), illegality industry (Andersson 2014), and detention rights industry (Morris 2017). Each implies a different conceptualization of economy as well, creating a great deal of ambiguity about whether industries and economies are metaphorical or material (Martin 2017). Recent work on the intimate economies of detention, however, shows how detention produces migrants' deprivation by under feeding and irregularly feeding detained migrants and failing to provide them with sufficient clothing and hygiene products (Hiemstra and Conlon 2017). Destitute migrants then work for \$1 to \$2 per day to buy overpriced commissary items and phone calls to loved ones, laboring in a cycle of accumulation by dispossession. This highly exploitative structure of waged work is only possible for *detained noncitizens*, who are not full rights-bearing subjects in U.S. constitutional and immigration law. Similarly, Bales and Mayblin (2018) argued that detainee labor sits on a continuum of “unfree labor.” Immigration status and spatial practices of enclosure produce particular kinds of laboring subjects, embedding them in regimes of value specific to immigration control. The focus has largely been on macroeconomic industry-level analyses of for-profit contractors (Golash-Boza 2009), lobbying expenditures (Doty and Wheatley 2013; Carson and Diaz 2015), and profits and government expenditures. Extending work on intimate economies of migrant detention, this article builds on scholarship exploring the political dimensions of immigration and asylum regimes and brings an explicit conceptualization of the economic relationships sustaining these regimes. This article focuses, therefore, on the circuits of value necessary for—and produced through—spatial practices of encampment, dispossession, detention, and deterrence.

We understand economies as circuits of value produced through social, political, and calculative practices and laboring bodies. Broadly, we are inspired by

recent work on biocapital and lively commodities that interrogate the specific ways in which new commodities and new forms of labor are rendered, measured, valued, financed, and circulated (Rajan 2006; Cooper 2008; Cooper and Waldby 2014). Scholarship on lively commodities takes account of the moment when new commodities enter into a process of valuation, where they become envisioned as sources of surplus, exchange, affect, circulation, or possibility (Barua 2019). Value does not necessarily mean price, or profit, as we detail throughout this article.

Furthermore, analyses of new commodities and moments of valuation have pointed to the crucial role of the state and laws in constituting commodifiable biological material. National immigration laws are also foundational to destitution economies as immigration categories render mobile people as destitute, unemployable, and excludable in highly particular ways. Although the specific operations and relations of bioeconomies do not map directly onto destitution economies, the analytic methods employed in this literature resonate with broader interrogations of diverse economies (Gibson-Graham 2014). This scholarship emphasizes how capitalist economies function in different ways—and that not all economies are capitalist. In addition, this research demonstrates that social and political difference shape how seemingly independent economic processes unfold. As Gilmore (2007) argued, racial formations are very much produced in place, so that urban and regional economic development refract specific racialized, gendered, and ethnic inequalities. Migrant and refugee politics are infused with racial stereotypes and essentialized notions of ethnic identity, as well as colonial hierarchies informing preferred migrants and presumptions of nonintegration (Mayblin 2017). As Wright (2004) argued, migrants' disposability emerges from an interplay between gendered hierarchies and gendered divisions of labor on the U.S.–Mexico border. Our three case studies exemplify how social difference, legal categories, and destitution come together to make migrants and refugees valuable to contractors and states in specific ways. These economies require, we argue, destitution. Moreover, as we noted earlier, the durability of these economic relationships will impede rights-based immigrant and refugee rights movements, challenging advocates to think differently about the possibilities of activism.

We propose that the concept of destitution economies captures how monetary exchange, transaction

data, and labor produce value from migrants' dependence and impoverishment. Although research on the governmentalities of migration control has identified rationalities of control (Walters 2006; Coddington 2017), care (Martin 2012; Pallister-Wilkins 2015), sovereign territoriality (Mountz 2011), and risk (Neal 2009), this work has not conceptualized how economic relationships condition and (re)produce these governmentalities. Instead, economic relationships are presumed to operate according to profit-oriented logics distinct from the legal, juridical, and political constitution of mobile subjects. Drawing on the substantial literature exploring neoliberal governmentality, we understand economic rationalities to be modes of governance and subjectification that operate in and through state power, rather than distinct from it (Larner 2003; Langley 2006). Significantly, our case studies cannot be explained easily by neoliberal rationalities: Refused asylum seekers in the United Kingdom are made valuable in their unproductivity, and deterrence practices bar their participation in neoliberal subjectivity; refugee camps' territorial and legal exceptionalism is made economically viable to solve their political intractability; and migrant detention and deportation dispossess migrants of their belongings and savings, hitching care and control to broader circuits of value. These microeconomies of mobility management (Conlon and Hiemstra 2017b) require sensitivity to place-specific conditions. For this reason, we understand economies to be multiple, localized, and highly contingent (Gibson-Graham 2014; Lai 2016; Langley and Leyshon 2017) rather than global logics, systems, or industries. In fact, it is precisely because immigration, asylum, and refugee laws are highly context specific that destitution economies of migration control take such different forms. Our three case studies show how destitution economies embed legal othering, dependence, and impoverishment in broader circuits of value, implicating actors, relationships, and places less visibly associated with carceral geographies of migration control.

We argue that immigration and asylum regulations not only have created forms of value, calculative practices, and circuits but have incorporated financial dependence and exploitation into state mobility control practices. Economic relations are not derivative of—or secondary to—political practices of categorization, detention, and deportation:

Cashlessness, encamped labor, and dispossession are techniques of political expulsion aimed at regulating admission to political life. Destitution is a process of impoverishment and enforced dependency that has become particularly important to immigration and asylum regimes. In other words, migration control practices organize circuits of value in ways that produce and enforce migrants', asylum seekers', and refugees' official dependence on state and nongovernmental organization (NGO) resources. Unofficially, of course, people develop other valuation practices, circuits of exchange and mobility, work, and labor that escape state control. Our aim in this article is to problematize the predominance of political analysis and critique of immigration and asylum regimes and to show how these regimes are producing circuits of value in and through law, state practices, and exclusion. Foregrounding specific entanglements of economic and political exclusion, we elaborate our approach through three case studies where law, state power, forced mobility, and destitution constitute circuits of value.

Method

To trace destitution economies, we compare three case studies, focusing on the circuits of value at work in each. In this article, our concern is how economies come into being through the practices that produce migrant destitution; that is, how processes of strategic deprivation are part of larger circuits of value. Comparative analysis draws on Le Espiritu's (2014) methodology of "critical juxtaposition," the "bringing together of seemingly different or disconnected events, communities, histories and spaces" (21) to better understand the multiple ways in which migrant destitution is made valuable to others. Recognizing the tendency of some comparative projects to homogenize difference, we argue that the political possibilities of making connections and highlighting relationships are many (Kar and Schuster 2016). Our analysis allows us to identify topologies of migrant destitution, common patterns of destitution, dependence, and dispossession materialized through localized practices. Because the field of migration governance is defined and codified through international human rights regimes and by international actors, theorizing locally specific yet common destitution economies of migration control

provides fresh potential to challenge new forms of state violence and exclusion.

Migration governance in the United Kingdom, United States, and Thailand shares many similarities: a focus on ad hoc and arbitrary policies toward migrants (Coddington 2018), the expanding role of private contractors in immigration enforcement practices (Flynn and Cannon 2009; Conlon and Hiemstra 2017a; Martin 2017), the shrinking of global aid budgets affecting support for refugees and migrants, and the increasingly xenophobic rhetoric targeting refugees and migrants across the world. Yet our comparison highlights that in the United Kingdom, United States, and Thailand, migrant destitution is embedded within strategies to limit opportunities for protection for refugees even as destitution becomes enmeshed within circuits of value creation. To compare, Stoler (2016) wrote, "is a situated political act of discernment" (15). Thus, our comparative analysis elucidates how, in distinct geographical settings, detaching people from citizenship produces forms of hyperalienation and exploitation that are linked to disparate yet related practices, structures, and logics that create—and benefit from—the deprivation of migrant and refugee populations in different parts of the world. Our approach allows us to map a "counter-topography" (Katz 2001) between distant places, to show the multiple ways in which destitution becomes valuable in migration control regimes. Focusing on one site would risk particularizing the phenomenon, locating cause and effect in local practices. Instead, our comparative approach shows how "engagements with global imperatives are the material forms and practices of situated knowledges" (Katz 2001, 1214). This methodological approach enables a politics of geographical knowledge production that is both situated and capable of speaking to global trends and to possibilities for migrant solidarity.

Throughout this article, we use the term *migrant* as a broad term to refer to mobile people, refugees, and asylum seekers where the discussion does not require legal specificity. We retain *refugees* and *asylum seekers* where these legal categories actively configure the context under consideration. We take this approach to acknowledge and challenge methodological nationalism in migration research, which both treats categories as definitive populations and takes state categories for granted as legitimate definitions of populations (Crawley and Skleparis 2018).

Accepting state categorizations in research presumes them to be analytically and theoretically viable, which is problematic for two reasons. First, it presumes that these categories adequately describe a population, when a volume of research documents their inadequacy for capturing nuanced migration journeys, the continual change in legal application of these categories, and migrants' agency about how and when they occupy categories. Second, accepting state categorizations of mobile people also accepts the definition of migration as a problem for states. In contrast, we begin from the position that the problem(s) of migration, asylum, detention, encampment, and destitution discussed in this article emerge from particular approaches to territoriality and the securitization, bordering, criminalization, and exclusion that have resulted from them.

Each case study relies on qualitative methods; nonetheless, different national contexts necessitate different methods. Document analysis supports analysis in the United Kingdom and the United States, whereas in Thailand, language barriers and government secrecy make interviews a preferred option. The Thai case study is based on two months of field research undertaken in Bangkok and Chiang Mai, Thailand, in 2015 based at the Asian Research Center for Migration at Chulalongkorn University. Kate Coddington conducted more than thirty semi-structured interviews with individuals including Thai immigration policymakers, members of Thai and international migration NGOs, and scholars studying regional migration issues (in English) focused on Thai and regional refugee protection practices. She was restricted to interviewing members of NGOs (mostly non-Thai) and policymakers (mostly Thai) by the terms of her agreement with the Thai government as part of receiving a research visa, which forbade her from working directly with migrants themselves. Her fieldwork took place before and after the 17 August 2015 Erawan Shrine bombings in Bangkok, an event that the Thai government attributed to its recent *refoulement* of asylum seekers to China. Given this context, nearly all identifying information of respondents is retracted to allow for their candidness. The interviews are supplemented by secondary source material documenting the eventual construction of the special economic zones in late 2015 after Coddington left Thailand.

The U.S. case study draws on ongoing research with Nancy Hiemstra (Conlon and Hiemstra 2014,

2017a, 2017b) that examines the infrastructure and economies of U.S. immigration detention. Collaborating since 2013, Hiemstra and Conlon have examined documents linked to the day-to-day operation of detention facilities in the greater New York/New Jersey area. Using Freedom of Information Act requests as well as state public records requests, Conlon and Hiemstra have amassed facility handbooks, commissary price lists, daily activity schedules, and subcontract agreements for services, including food provision, medical care, telecommunications, and laundry services, among other operations, for an array of facilities, including federally operated (by Immigration and Customs Enforcement) centers, state and local jails that house migrant detainees, and privately contracted facilities. Conlon and Hiemstra have also interviewed fifteen people, including lawyers, advocates, volunteer visitors, and a former detainee, who, through their various interactions with facilities, are knowledgeable about how detention centers function. Here, Conlon also draws on research and published reports on the deportation system (Martinez and Slack 2013; Ewing and Cantor 2016) to illustrate where and how dependency is produced and value extracted through accumulated dispossessions for migrants who are caught up in the U.S. detention and deportation regime.

The UK cashless debit card case study is based on similar methods, including site visits, collection of reports from NGOs, parliamentary reports and testimonies, Web sites and blog posts discussing cashless debit cards, and news media. Interviews are not included here because they were collected informally and, given the relatively small number of recipients near Durham University, risk revealing identifying information. The research was carried out from 2016 to 2018, a period that included the expansion of debit cards from refused asylum seekers to all asylum seekers and a change in service provider. This significantly broadened the number of organizations and asylum seekers receiving card-based benefits. Refused asylum seekers still cannot withdraw cash from ATMs with the card, however, whereas predecision asylum seekers can withdraw cash to spend how they choose.

In each case, we explore different circuits of value, which include the waged and reproductive labor of migrants themselves; practices of subjectification, categorization, and territorialization; calculations of potential productivity; expertise; and, of course, the important counterconduct of migrants

themselves. These relationships “extend beyond the boundaries of specific places” (Elwood, Lawson, and Sheppard 2017, 749) and occur both as dense material and discursive configurations situated in specific places as well as connected logics, strategies, and practices that are unevenly, yet expansively, distributed throughout space and time.

Thailand Case: Destitution through Categorization and Encampment

For more than thirty years, Thailand has hosted around 150,000 Burmese refugees and asylum seekers in camps along the border between Myanmar and Thailand. Whereas NGOs and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) categorize these migrants as asylum seekers and refugees, with important consequences for humanitarian aid and resettlement possibilities, they are not recognized as such by Thailand. Thailand is not a signatory to the 1951 Convention and 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees and refers to them as “displaced persons from Myanmar” and the camps as “temporary shelters.” Thailand has permitted NGOs to (at times) make refugee status determinations, operate the camps, provide humanitarian aid, and conduct development interventions and at times has permitted camp residents to move freely around the surrounding area, although now the camps are closed. Some NGOs serve migrants generally and some actively register and recognize refugee status under the Convention. How and when people become displaced people, refugees, and asylum seekers has varied, with consequences for migrants’ livelihoods. In practice, migrants have needed to subsidize their diminishing levels of subsistence support from NGOs with work outside the camps, even though movement generates opportunities for exploitation from police and some nearby residents.

Changing official status determinations of refugee and asylum seeker have affected residents of the camps. The UNHCR had made refugee status determinations for people in the camps until 2005. That year, the Thai government assumed responsibility for new migrants—yet has made no new status determinations since that time, despite the continued arrival of migrants from Myanmar. Shifting duties from NGOs to the Thai government led to the growth of an unrecognized refugee or asylum seeker population in the camp, who were ineligible for formal refugee

resettlement. UNHCR-designated refugees continued to be resettled until 2014, when the UNHCR stopped resettling people from the camps and, simultaneously, the Thai government announced plans to begin repatriating camp residents to Myanmar. The UNHCR has declared Myanmar safe for repatriation, but advocates note that most residents of the camps are reluctant to leave. Since 2010, when the Myanmar military government transitioned to civilian rule, Myanmar has been seen as increasingly open for economic development. As Norum, Mostafanezhad, and Sebro (2016) wrote, the change in governance has been accompanied by a move in international development and humanitarian assistance funding from the border areas to inside Myanmar. In 2015, advocates from different migrant support organizations within Thailand mentioned that the government’s interest in the potential for economic development in the border region was as a means of “solving” the persistent problem of camp residents precluded from resettlement and unwilling to repatriate. Officials were interested in taking advantage of the “captive labor force” of the Burmese migrant population within the camps through the construction of special economic zones to employ residents of the camps. This idea, according to an advocate, would not only solve the problem of long-term camp residents but also serve as a barrier to new labor migrants from Myanmar by providing the incentive of increased Thai wages without requiring migrants to cross the border. According to a representative of a migrant NGO interviewed in 2015, “A special economic zone along the land border has been the subject of a number of talks ... the Thai private sector and the international community want to transition refugees to labor migrants. [Refugees] are seen by companies as being better qualified.”

In 2015, Thailand established the first of its ten planned special economic zones (SEZs). The SEZ in Tak Province, along the Myanmar border, incorporates Mae Sot, an area of cross-border flows of goods, laborers, and forced migrants for the past several decades. Nearby is the largest of the Thai border refugee camps, Mae La, which houses more than 37,000 mostly Karen refugees from Myanmar. A 2016 study by the GMS Secretariat describes the location of the SEZ as being reliant on a labor supply that “comprises migrant day-workers from Myanmar and nearby Burmese refugee camps” (GMS

Secretariat 2016, 14). The SEZ is dominated by Thai firms seeking low-wage employees: Small domestic firms rely on domestic workers, and the larger firms “overwhelmingly employ foreign labor,” including residents of the camps (GMS Secretariat 2016, 20). What the Thai government had envisioned as the promise of the captive labor market of the refugee camps in 2015 has begun to become a reality in the Mae Sot region.

What made this vision of Mae La’s refugees as a captive labor force for low-wage Thai firms possible? The circuits of value production that result in the creation of a cheap, dependent labor force begin with techniques of categorization—particularly, in this case, the gap in categorization between the refugees for whom permanent and group resettlement was a possibility and the asylum seekers and nonrecognized individuals who now make up most of Mae La’s camp population. Changing processes of classification reveal the politics of bounding within status determinations and how the category of refugee is constantly transformed and reinterpreted “in response to shifts in political alliances or interests on the part of refugee-receiving countries and the evolution of policy and law” (Crawley and Skleparis 2018, 4). As governments increasingly replace NGOs in authoring new categories of migrants, the label of refugee becomes increasingly fractioned to detach migrants from claims to international protection (Zetter 2007). In this case, the Thai government’s decision in 2005 to take over refugee registration and the deliberate decision not to process newly arrived migrants’ claims meant that many migrants were left without access to resettlement, humanitarian aid, or even temporary protection; in short, their destitution was produced.

This case study highlights the important role of legal malleability in the constitution of destitution economies: The categorization of people by the “discretionary state” (Coutin et al. 2017) exacerbates their destitution within the camps, as studies linking sociolegal status and precarity have similarly shown (Lewis et al. 2015; Burrige and Gill 2017). Scholars such as Ong (2006) have noted that similar strategies of “graduated sovereignty” and precarious citizenship constrain the rights of populations within other SEZs in Asia. Here, however, we see that legal malleability, and particularly the selective use of legal status categories, is central to the production of destitution economies. In this case, the deliberate

use of ambiguous, selective, or malleable status produces potential value, specifically embodied as flexible, underpaid, legally precarious migrant labor. Thus, the SEZ’s location and labor force are made possible through the deliberate use of gaps between recognized refugees and unrecognized asylum seekers or migrants (Coddington 2018).

The captive labor force was also constructed through the encampment of refugees. Without the long-term tactics of control over refugee mobility, they would not have been available for Thai low-wage firms. Olivius (2017) noted that encampment allows for the spatial control of refugees, efficient delivery of services, and the isolation of refugees from the host society, especially important in the case of the Thai border camps. Although scholars contest the notion of refugee camps as complete spaces of exception (Ramadan 2013), here camp residents’ ambiguous legal status renders them distinctly available to exploitation (e.g., by the Thai police, who extort refugees attempting to enter and leave the camps) or development interventions (Turner 2016; Olivius 2017). Mountz (2015) drew similar conclusions about the ambiguous legal status of migrants sequestered offshore in Nauru and Guam. According to Turner (2016), this ambiguity stems from a fundamental contradiction in terms: Camp residents are forbidden to settle, because they are supposed to be on the move, yet camp residents cannot remain on the move because they have nowhere to go.

Encampment required that migrants develop local options for subsistence, yet it also facilitated the creation of a community that prefers to remain in place rather than repatriate. As Vaddhanaphuti (2016) noted, the younger generations of refugees born in the camps do not imagine Myanmar as “home”: “they are not willing to ‘return’ to Myanmar as they have no ties with it and share a different worldview” (3). Encampment of refugees, in this case, highlights another aspect of destitution economies: the constitution of surplus populations. Gilmore (2007) pointed to the California prison system as an example of recurring geographical attempts to stabilize the problem of surplus unemployed workers in urban centers and rural peripheries, and destitution economies operate through similar spatial and temporal configurations that recast extreme dispossession as underutilized labor. The destitution economy of Thailand’s

border SEZ connects migrants' legal malleability, encampment, and refusal to return and the management of surplus populations, making migrants' sociopolitical exclusion a resource rather than a burden. Reframing the camp as a potential source of low-paid workers, this case highlights an underlying logic driving destitution economies more generally. Value is envisioned not as something to be extracted primarily in the present moment; private investment requires valuation of encamped migrants in speculative, anticipatory terms, as potential labor. In the Thai case, the value of camp residents for the SEZ is primarily understood as a future capacity for value—a speculative imaginary that Tadiar (2013) described as “an anticipatory time of realization of value in excess of the present value for which it is exchanged” (22). Surplus camp residents, therefore, become envisioned as future currency, a “captive labor force” that generates value for the manufacturers and investors along the border but also solves the problems of refugees prohibited from resettling or repatriating.

United States Case: Care, Control, and Accumulating Dispossessions

Religious icons, personal photographs, plastic bottles, footwear, jackets, and other utterly ordinary everyday things; feminist geographer Sundberg (2013) presented a vivid picture of items left behind in the deserts of southwestern Arizona along the Mexico–U.S. border. Sundberg's account offers a glimpse into the character and significance of the possessions that many migrants must give up—or that they are stripped of—as they travel northward en route into the United States. In this case study, we detail some of the ways in which migrants produce value in the dispossession of their belongings. Here, circuits of value connect the deprivation of migrants' things, money, and identity documents with value produced through their unpaid or underpaid labor.

Immigration detention in the United States has expanded significantly over the past twenty-five years, and even more sharply since the Trump administration took office. In 1994 the average daily population of detained migrants was 6,785. In 2014 that figure was 33,200 (Ryo and Peacock 2018); in 2018 more than 45,000 people were detained per day (Human Rights First 2019), and the budget

request for 2019 proposed a quota of 52,000 (Benenson 2018; U.S. Department of Homeland Security 2018). These substantial increases reflect legislation (and Executive Orders) that, since the mid-1990s, have worked to criminalize an expanding swath of categories of migrants. Among other things, changes in the juridico-political landscape introduced and expanded a category of crime labeled aggravated felony under immigration law to include more than thirty types of offenses. The criminalization of minor immigration offenses has led immigration judges to remark that numerous “non-violent, fairly trivial misdemeanors are considered aggravated felonies under our immigration laws” (Marks and Slavin 2012, 92). Detention is mandatory for migrants convicted of an aggravated felony, and these changes have therefore expanded the categories of detainable migrants (Martin 2015).

Even more recently, and ever more explicitly, the Trump regime's stance on immigration potentially makes migration itself a criminal act. The current administration's recent xenophobic, racist efforts to criminalize immigration and migrants include a zero-tolerance policy that separated migrant children from family members on arrival at the U.S. border, announcement of a “denaturalization initiative” (Wasem 2018) aimed at retroactively revoking naturalized citizenship for migrants who have had even minor irregularities² on their citizenship application, and planned redefinition and expansion of public charge rules for immigrants that effectively deny citizenship eligibility for immigrants who have received government assistance such as food stamps and public housing support (Wheeler and Schreiber 2019). For criminalized migrants, detention and deportation are ever-present threats. These developments thus reduce migrants to destitute subjects who are yoked to, and by, a system of care and control. Moreover, dispossessing destitute migrants of their things is part of a carceral circuit of value that extracts labor and accumulates capital.

Like the desert trails that Sundberg described, detention facility handbooks provide insight into the ways in which detained migrants are further dispossessed. Handbooks can, we argue, be understood as part of the biopolitics that produces irregular migrants as destitute and simultaneously as subjects with value. Facility handbooks we have reviewed state that individuals must swap their “civilian” clothes for a prison jumpsuit and relinquish all items

and money in their possession; the only personal item permitted is a wedding band. In this process, detained migrants are stripped not only of their material possessions but also of their identity, with expressions of individuality or affiliation vetoed or subject to disciplinary control. Part of U.S. detention's unstated punitive function, removing people's possessions produces their subsequent dependence on commissaries for small comforts and family members or low-paid work for money.

Under these conditions—confined in remote facilities, with limited access to support networks or cash, and housed in detention for an indefinite period of time—detained migrants become valuable as a commodified labor supply in the day-to-day operation of detention facilities. In previous research on subcontracts and the infrastructure and operation of immigration detention, we identified a cycle of privation and dispossession, need and demand, coerced labor, and commodification of immigrant detainees (Conlon and Hiemstra 2014, 2017a). For example, until recently, subcontracts for detention facility telecommunications services have included substantial commission rates that are passed on to detainees. This greatly restricts migrant detainees' ability to maintain regular contact with friends and family members outside detention. In 2013, for instance, detainees housed in New Jersey facilities paid almost \$15.00 for a fifteen-minute phone call to the local New York area; in contrast, the same call from a landline or cell phone outside detention would cost \$2.00 or less (see Conlon and Hiemstra 2014). Because they are limited to a small number of possessions, and this includes cash or credit in their accounts, migrant detainees often rely on others—family, friends, or volunteers—to purchase phone cards. Alternatively, they can participate in “voluntary” work programs for which they are paid \$1.00 per day. Through these microcircuits of value, we can see how detention conditions produce impoverishment and deprivation, which, in turn, becomes a means for extracting labor and profit from migrant detainees.

Migrants are also dispossessed when their possessions are removed or lost as they move through the U.S. detention and deportation system, a literal manifestation of the sociolegal categories producing destitution. For instance, Martinez and Slack (2013) reported that over half of individuals detained for more than one week stated that some of their belongings went unaccounted for and were not

returned to them; extrapolating from this study, Encinas (2017) noted, if the sample in their research is representative, that would mean of 1.5 million deportations between 2009 and 2012, approximately one third, or “more than 540,000 migrants ... did not have personal possessions returned to them.” There are specific spaces and situations within the detention and deportation system where dispossession of this kind are more likely to occur. Being processed en masse, as is the case under Operation Streamline, a type of fast-track removal of irregular immigrants along the southwest U.S.–Mexico border, is one such situation. Martinez and Slack (2013) reported that of those who were deported in Operation Streamline proceedings, 57 percent indicated having “a possession taken and not returned” (3). Being transferred between detention facilities or immigration agencies or actors is another situation that increases the likelihood of being dispossessed, with studies indicating that at least half of migrants in U.S. detention are detained at least once (Ryo and Peacock 2018). In recent years, the logic driving transfers has been to fill detention quotas and to avail of bed space in underutilized detention facilities, where contractors including state and local governments as well as private contractors vie for the federal dollars that Immigration and Customs Enforcement pays to detain (see Hiemstra 2013; Martin 2015).

The consequences of dispossession for migrants who are deported are severe. Martinez and Slack (2013) described the loss of clothing, money, cell phones, and identity documents for migrants deported to Mexico, dispossessions that push migrants further into impoverishment and dependency on others. Migrants become “more vulnerable to extortion via unscrupulous entrepreneurs ... or to trafficking or smuggling operations” (Martinez and Slack 2013, 8). In short, dispossession at deportation makes migrants dependent and desperate and pushes them deeper toward clandestine destitution economies where the cycle of value, extraction, disposability, and further dispossession begins again.³

Here, we see economies of dispossession within the U.S. detention and deportation system that deprive migrants of their belongings, money, and identity documents and that push migrants into new forms of value creation through their unpaid or underpaid labor. In this case, migrants become valuable as both laborers and consumers in the cycle of dispossession, deprivation, and underpaid “voluntary”

work. As in the other case studies, migrants' sociolegal status is fundamental to these circuits of value, as are spatial practices of forced mobility (transfers, deportation) and enclosure (detention). Indeed, as in the case studies presented here, the U.S. detention system's specific destitution economy exists precisely because migrants are detainable and deportable, and their sociolegal status generates new opportunities for the production of value. Value emerges through profits on commissary sales, underpaid migrant labor, and the possible future value of migrants' forced mobility. Unlike the encampment or immobility of Burmese refugees in Thailand, detained migrants in the United States face dispossession in their forced mobility into detention, between centers, and in deportation. Through the frequent movement of migrants within the detention and deportation system, value is produced—not simply profits in the form of privatized bed spaces but also the anticipation of future value in the form of susceptibility to extortion, trafficking, or new forms of dependency. Here, it is migrants' carceral mobilities through this system that make them valuable in their destitution. Across our case studies, shifting categorizations enable states to strategically im/mobilize migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers, enforcing their destitution and, in turn, making them valuable as needy subjects.

United Kingdom Case: Destitution as Deterrence to Asylum Seekers

In this section, we discuss how destitution is both produced and productive, creating circuits of value that depend on the entrenchment of poverty for asylum seekers in the United Kingdom. Although *destitution* is not a legally codified term in most places, it is an important legal category in UK asylum law, and it is within literature on UK asylum seekers that we find the majority of work exploring the conditions of how life is experienced for those who are destitute. Indeed, the category of destitute asylum seeker is a recognized social–legal category used by government, welfare, and support sectors. Under the United Kingdom's 1999 Immigration Act, Section 95(3), destitution is described as follows:

A person is destitute if (a) he does not have adequate accommodation or any means of obtaining it (whether or not his essential living needs are met); or (b) he has

adequate accommodation or the means of obtaining it, but cannot meet his other essential living needs. (Cited in Bloom 2015, 80)

Destitute refused asylum seekers (including those with cases pending on appeal) can access particular forms of state support, including “no-choice” housing, where asylum seekers are dispersed across the country in basic accommodation without regard to family or individual preference and provided below-poverty-line subsistence benefits. As Cuthill (2017) noted, the more than 285,000 destitute asylum seekers living without recourse to public funds end up homeless, subject to ill health, and vulnerable to exploitation. Scholars have linked the United Kingdom's “state-enforced destitution” (Waite and Lewis 2017, 969) with increasingly restrictive welfare policies but stress that targeting asylum seekers introduces an exclusionary bordering logic into wider projects of governance of the poor (Guentner et al. 2016).

Recent UK asylum policy has focused on deterring asylum seekers from traveling to the United Kingdom to claim asylum and to increasing the cost of making those claims. Part of a broader effort to create a “hostile environment” for migrants in the United Kingdom, administrative changes to the asylum process have included the privatization of asylum seeker accommodation (Darling 2014, 2016), eliminating free legal aid (Burridge and Gill 2017), and raising fees for appealing negative asylum decisions. For refused asylum seekers, Home Office policies of detention, mandatory reporting, and reduction or removal of benefits seek to incentivize refused asylum seekers' voluntary departure by, quite simply, making daily life unlivable. In addition, these policies now rely heavily on private-sector firms, so that the implementation provides a source of private-sector revenue for housing and support services where councils were once key actors in the asylum field (see Darling 2016). This mingling of private and public involvement allows private companies to accumulate profit through the dispossession of migrant labor and resources (Conlon and Hiemstra 2014, 2017). Financial and housing supports for destitute asylum seekers are so low that there is no opportunity to move out of destitution. Neither asylum seekers nor refused asylum seekers are allowed to formally work, adding to difficulties sustaining themselves independently.

Concerns about the United Kingdom's "pull factors"—easy access to health care, work, and benefits—have provoked policies aimed at limiting access to these entitlements and the quality of life they produce. Labor migrants cannot access public funds of any sort, whereas asylum seekers may access them at reduced rates to UK residents. Asylum seekers applying for support must first prove that they have no savings, assets, or family on whom they can rely. Following this evaluation, asylum seekers are allocated housing in a location decided by contractors; this no-choice housing system is now entirely privatized and relies heavily on low-cost housing in deindustrialized areas like Manchester, Glasgow, and the northeast of England (Darling 2016). The privatization of asylum hosting follows the privatization of the detention estate (Gill 2009), as well as welfare services in the United Kingdom in general. In the case of housing, however, this privatization relies on the devaluation of former working-class housing in certain areas of the United Kingdom and the United Kingdom's obligations under European Union asylum law to provide for destitute asylum seekers. In other words, this particular assemblage of infrastructure requires international and national legal mechanisms on asylum and public and private contracting. In categorizing people, asylum and immigration laws render asylum seekers destitute even as the privatization of state services has linked, in this case, transnational security and "life services" companies like G4S and Sodexo to them. The emergence of these kinds of contractors has relied on the restructuring of state economies worldwide; both are global firms providing a wide range of security, custody, accommodation, cleaning, and catering services formerly provided by public institutions. Although immigration and asylum might not be exceptional as increasingly privatized state functions, they do operate through legal regimes that, in this case, seek to make everyday life undesirable up to the point of unlivability. Here value emerges not through the provision of care and comfort but from withholding them.

In addition to relocation to no-choice housing outside of London, destitute asylum seekers may access monetary support, as well. A debit card system, the ASPEN card, has recently replaced vouchers for asylum seekers, allowing them to withdraw cash at regular ATMs, whereas refused asylum seekers have been issued cashless debit cards since 2009. Asylum seekers

can apply for destitution relief through different provisions in UK asylum law before and after a decision is made on their case: Section 95 provides £37.75 per person per week for open cases and Section 4 provides £35.39 per person per week to refused asylum seekers who cannot return to their country of origin. Both groups are given funds on an ASPEN card, managed by Financial Services, Ltd., a company specializing in point-of-sale systems and transaction data management. From 2009 to 2017, refused asylum seekers were limited to approved retailers, which greatly restricted what people could purchase—even creating issues with subsistence—and where people could shop. Shame and harassment accompanied use of the card, and asylum seekers experienced racist or discriminatory behaviors (Coddington 2019). Like the Azure Card before it, the ASPEN card produces data about what and where people purchase goods. Purchasing data might be valuable for immigration enforcement: Asylum seeker support organizations have reported instances of the UK Home Office using transaction patterns and data to cut or curtail financial support, but the criteria for evaluating these data have never been shared (Carnet, Blanchard, and Ellis 2014; Unity Centre Glasgow 2017). Nevertheless, the provision of destitution support has itself become a mechanism of surveillance, highlighting the important role of specific technologies in producing particular destitution economies. Here, asylum seekers' everyday mobilities are registered in purchases, and these data are circulated between financial services firms and the Home Office.

Destitution-as-deterrence in the United Kingdom has unfolded through the privatization of services previously offered by council governments and non-profit organizations and through an increasingly hostile Home Office. Not only is the category of destitution productive but asylum seekers' reproductive labor is required for both the production of transaction data and the reproduction of destitution as a domain of service provision. It is important to note that although we can trace economic relationships between people and organizations, destitution-as-deterrence is more than the reduction of economic choices. Deterrence is meant to be a shared affect, resulting from a generalized impression of discomfort, lack of opportunity, and probable punishment. The circulation of discomfort acts as an affective economy, circulating "in an economic sense, working to differentiate some others from other others, a differentiation that is never 'over,' as

it waits for others who have not yet arrived” (Ahmed 2004, 123; also see Hage 2003). It is therefore critical to attend to the affective economies that deterrence policies presume, in addition to the material infrastructures, contracting relationships, and financial networks.

Here, new finance–security assemblages (de Goede 2012) do not improve quality of life or improve efficiencies but do the opposite: They weaponize the degradation of services, frustration with glitchy technologies, and bureaucratic opacity. In the UK case, value is produced through the possible surveillance and financial profiling capacities of migrants’ debit card use but also through the less tangible but desired quality of making life more difficult for migrants. Migrant purchases are valuable for the information they provide, but their discomfort illustrates the value of deterrence within wider affective economies. The legal categories and procedures of asylum produce unwaged populations dependent on basic care, so that legal apparatuses form a critical part of destitution economies’ circuitries. In this case, banal contracting and procurement procedures link broader, international circuits of value to asylum regimes. Destitution-as-deterrence, in particular, emphasizes the reproductive and domestic not only as spaces of monitoring but as sources of labor; it is migrants’ everyday labor, such as grocery shopping, that produces transactional data and inhabits homes. The financial services company collects and analyzes those data, valorizing the expertise necessary to make sense of the data and share it with the Home Office. As in both previous cases, categorization as excludable enables enforced destitution for refused asylum seekers, and the mechanisms of state support in turn render everyday life as valuable data. Again, the movement of migrants through their everyday routines is a critical part of the production of value: Their “liquidity” as unemployable, dependent, and impoverished subjects makes them valuable as subjects of immigration control.

Discussion: Conceptualizing Destitution Economies

Our three case studies describe different destitution economies, each reliant on legal categorization of migrants, spatial practices of mobility control (encampment, detention, no-choice housing), and deprivation. Each case study shows how context-

specific mechanisms produce destitution economies: SEZs, detention conditions, including work programs, transaction data analysis, and sharing. Although specific practices differ, the legal othering of migrants creates the conditions for their destitution—a material and discursive configuration of extreme impoverishment and dependency—and underscores how that destitution becomes valuable for others and, through private-sector investment in all three cases, embedded within broader circuits of value. Although destitution economies are bound up with for-profit forms of carceral control, we argue that destitution economies are driven by more than profit. The Thai example is grounded in the flexible categorization of migrants and their reorientation as possible surplus labor. The U.S. example, meanwhile, is based on the ratcheting up of migrant destitution within the detention system and cycles of dispossession, deprivation, and underpaid work. Dispossession upon dispossession accumulates as migrants move—and are made to move—through the U.S. detention and deportation system. In the United Kingdom, migrants’ everyday labor produces destitution-as-deterrence, which generates value for the UK border enforcement regime both through material economic relationships and the long-term affectual drain on migrants’ lives.

In each case study, destitution economies are built on a foundation of insecure legal status. Although impoverished migrants share some of the same grueling daily challenges as other destitute populations, their legal status matters. Migrants in Thailand face the challenge of feeding their families through low-wage exploitative factory jobs, but having to sneak out of closed refugee camps on a daily basis adds new levels of vulnerability and risk. Migrant detainees in the United States, like their counterparts in prison, face the injustice of forced labor within the U.S. carceral system, and frequent transfers, indefinite detention, and probable eventual deportation lead to lost possessions and further impoverishment. Meanwhile, in the United Kingdom, debit card holders face restrictions similar to other welfare benefits recipients, yet their possible deportation increases the impacts of any failure to comply. The malleability of migrants’ categorizations is integral to their deprivation, as well as to the kinds of value they produce.

Across these destitution economies, migrants’ encampment, dispossession, and im/mobility make them valuable to others in their need, surplus labor,

and desire to stay in place. Although privatization and profit can be key rationalities for assigning value to migrants within destitution economies, these arrangements also reinterpret destitute migrants as commensurate with forms of economic value. It is through their uncertain status, dependence, and extreme impoverishments that migrants become translated as differently valuable, as a form of surplus that can be capitalized on. In short, destitute migrants translate and commensurate between different valuation mechanisms. In our case studies, migrants become a bit like “cash,” as Tadiar (2016) wrote, “which means their immediate convertibility into any number of things and actions in order to serve as so many kinds of relays, intersections, components, and channels for the value-producing movements of others” (75). Destitution economies are grounded in the circulation and exchange of migrants as surplus: They must leave the Thai camps, be repeatedly transferred and incrementally dispossessed in the U.S. detention system, and continually shop and produce transactional data to generate value within the United Kingdom’s destitution-as-deterrence process. Circuits of value are not simply moments of exchange or transactions but the movement between orders of value; that is, one crucial way to make migrants valuable is to keep them on the move.

Although each economic relationship opens avenues for value to be produced in the form of profit, value is not only extractable in the present in each example. Through the sense of future capitalizing on surplus labor on the Thai–Myanmar border, the potential ongoing economic ties to be developed between public enforcement agencies and private actors that encompass detention operations in the United States, and migrant-generated purchasing data in the United Kingdom, value is seen as anticipatory. The potential value of migrants generated through their temporary, uncertain, or vulnerable legal status reveals a “prospecting logic at work” (Mezzadra and Neilson 2017, 199) within destitution economies, creating space for speculative financialization practices to become entrenched within enforcement and migrant governance.

Conclusion

Our conceptualization of destitution economies reframes rationalities of border enforcement and thereby opens up new questions for geographical

research on political geographies of migration, economic geographies of bordering, and legal geographies of exclusion. Whereas concrete mapping of industry-level, for-profit contractors within the immigration industrial complex has ushered in a range of important geographical work underscoring the incentive to profit from border enforcement, our attention to destitution economies points to the connectedness of speculation, dispossession, impoverishment, and surveillance technologies. Our case studies show how destitution economies of migration control mobilize speculative, anticipatory forms of value, thereby incorporating spatial practices of encampment, forced im/mobilities, and incentivization of return alongside material profits from privatization and, as we have shown, substantively inform why and how border enforcement is changing.

Beyond rethinking migration governance, our conceptualization of destitution economies of migration control contributes to broader rethinking of how economies are made to work. As de Goede (2005) wrote, economies are performative: “processes of knowledge and interpretation do not exist in addition to, or of secondary importance to, ‘real’ material financial structures but are precisely *the way in which finance materializes*” (5–7). In destitution economies, the legal categorizations, migration and refugee statistics, and politicization of transboundary mobility create the material conditions of destitution in which migrants are expected to merely live. The shared affects constructed through destitution economies—the risk of everyday mobility in Thailand, the criminalization constructed through aggravated felonies and mandatory prison uniforms in the United States, or the discomfort and hostility produced through cashless debit cards in the United Kingdom—are coconstituted with the circuits of exchange described in our case studies. In particular, destitution economies of migration control rely on migrants’ staying alive. Destitution is precisely the state of living without thriving, existing without resources to move on or settle permanently. Migrants’ value emerges, then, from remaining on the move and everyday reproductive capacities. The restrictive border regimes and ethnonationalist fears that justify migrants’ and refugees’ exclusion from the privileges of paid work make them valuable in their decapacification.

In asking how destitute migrants and refugees become valuable for others, our argument speaks to

both political movements and contemporary migration control research. The interpellation of migrants as value-bearing subjects embeds economic relationships in ways that impede migrant and refugee rights movements, and it is critical that methodologies and knowledge production move beyond the limitations of rights-based advocacy and provide fresh counter-narratives. In the United States, boycotts are already underway against Wayfair, Amazon, and a number of banks, drawing attention to financial connections and infrastructures of complicity in migrant exclusion. Finally, destitution economies of migration control demand deeper integration of recent work in political and economic geography. Articulating migration and border control as a problem of politics has limited geographers' appreciation of the ways in which forms of value production are coming into being through the mobility of surplus populations. Approaching questions of privatization of public services, migrant detention, or the marketization of migrants as labor as unreconstructed capitalist logics obscures the practices of law, state power, and forced mobility that change the nodes composing circuits of value, as well as the sociotechnical practices of circulation that drive processes of value production. In particular, we call for more geographical research working across the politics of marketization, critical logistics of state violence, and the racialization of urban (under)development, migration, and impoverishment. Destitution, as we have argued, is critical to political practices of bordering and exclusion—and these practices cannot be understood without the economic rationale of exploitation and dependency that drive them.

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Notes

1. Please see the Method section for a description of how we use the terms migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers.
2. Irregularities include prior removal orders, which some asylum seekers might have prior to a defensive asylum application.
3. In an attempt to bring greater transparency to the system, national standards on Transport, Escort, Detention, and Search (TEDS) were introduced in 2015. This policy lays out procedures for handling detainee belongings while "immigration-enforcement agents [are] entrusted with their care" (Ewing and Cantor 2016, 1). To date, the policy has had no effect, however, according to Ewing and Cantor's research. The reported rate of items missing in 2015, before TEDS was implemented, was 41.5 percent and in 2016, after TEDS was introduced, the rate was 41 percent. What the policy achieves is new layers of accounting and bureaucracy but not greater accountability.

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