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Abstract:

Confinement and Mobility: The Paradox of the Refugee Experience

Refugees present a paradox in the history of international relations, as they both demonstrate the permeability of borders and the lived experiences of migration and movement, and yet their confinement in camps and at borders reinstates the sovereign power of the nation-state. On the one hand, men and women memorably took to the sea in makeshift rafts and challenging death to leave their nation-state of birth. Their ability to control their movement and their desire for a new location has been paramount. On the other hand, refugee camps have been defined by barbed wire, controlled movement, and minimal political opportunities for the individuals detained.

To explore these contradictions and international politics, I will look at three case studies, all defined by legacies of U.S. empire and the late Cold War. First, I will analyze a key moment in 1980-1981, when the U.S. government sent more than 1000 Haitians to a makeshift refugee camp on a U.S. military base in Puerto Rico. Then, I will move geographically and temporally to the status and controversy over Vietnamese refugees in Palawan, which existed from 1979 through 1996. Finally, I will shift back to the Caribbean and Cuban *balseiros* on the U.S. naval base in Guantánamo Bay (GTMO). By charting the history of refugee camps in Puerto Rico, the Philippines, and GTMO, I argue how U.S. power shaped refugee camps outside its continental borders.