

Introduction

Departures

Committed to community-engaged scholarship, the Critical Refugee Studies Collective (CRSC) charts and builds the field of Critical Refugee Studies by centering refugee lives—and the creative and critical potentiality that such lives offer.

CRITICAL REFUGEE STUDIES COLLECTIVE, “Who We Are”

The objective of this book is to produce knowledge that is not only about but also by and for refugees. At its heart, critical refugee studies (CRS) is about *departures*: both the act of leaving and a divergence from a usual course of action. Grounded in refugee experiences of leave-taking, CRS emerges from a growing recognition of the need for a new approach to the study of refugees, a new *analytic* committed to realizing the meaningful change that refugee knowledges uniquely make desirable and achievable. Such outcomes might fit Audre Lorde’s oft-cited notion of “genuine change” that eschews “the master’s tools.”¹ The conditions of emergence for CRS are akin to other emergent fields that arose in conjunction with movements seeking to address the problems and limitations of existing fields and methods. For these movements, existing fields and methods were coming to be seen as complicit

with—or at least inadequate to confront—such conditions as systemic racism, patriarchy, settler/colonialism, militarism, capitalist exploitation, homophobia, transphobia, xenophobia, and environmental destruction. That complicity and inadequacy stem from deep-seated investments in conserving the supremacy of the modern (usually Western/colonized) world, including modernity’s capacity to save the rest of the world from themselves and even ironically from modernity’s own excesses.

Diverse and widespread movements for liberation have forged alternative approaches for imagining and realizing new possibilities. Challenging traditional paradigms that render difference knowable, manageable, and profitable, new fields—postcolonial studies, Indigenous studies, ethnic studies, gender studies, LGBTQIA+ studies, among others—have emerged to challenge the status quo and recognize what and who have been overlooked and underestimated, at times with genocidal consequences. Alongside this critical and creative turn, a growing body of knowledge production departs from existing ways refugees have been studied, insisting that the introduction to refugee worlds be rendered on refugees’ own terms. The word *refugee* emerges in this work as a crucial analytical term and category for situating and naming a critique, as such terms as Black, Indigenous, Transgender, and many other (self-)identifying labels do, in necessary critical engagement with systemic structures and historically sedimented practices that reproduce the conscious and unconscious biases and inequalities of the status quo.

Departures: An Introduction to Critical Refugee Studies supports, contextualizes, and advances the field of CRS by providing a capacious account of its genealogy, methods, and key concepts, as well as its premises, priorities, and possibilities. It aims to be a resource

and guide for all readers invested in addressing the concerns, perspectives, knowledge production, and global imaginings of refugees. For those who are unfamiliar with CRS, the book outlines the field's main tenets, questions, and concerns; and for scholars already engaged in the field, it offers new approaches that integrate theoretical rigor and policy concerns with refugees' rich and complicated lived worlds. For practitioners, *Departures* offers examples of how to link communities, movements, networks, artists, and academic institutions and to forge new and humane reciprocal paradigms, dialogues, visuals, and technologies that replace and reverse the dehumanization of refugees within imperialist gazes and frames, sensational stories, savior narratives, big data, colorful mapping, and spectator scholarship.

What must give way for the emergence of CRS? To answer, it would be instructive to consider the contexts and implications for invoking the term "refugee." As the Palestinian American scholar Edward W. Said has noted, "Refugees . . . are a creation of the twentieth-century state. The word 'refugee' has become a political one, suggesting large herds of innocent and bewildered people requiring urgent international assistance, whereas 'exile' carries with it, I think, a touch of solitude and spirituality."² "Refugee" is a term that does indeed suggest—nay, demand—"urgent international assistance." It then functions as a potent instrument of politics and culture, wielded by those in power in the exercise and legitimation of that power. In such usage, "refugee" operates as a mechanism of control and incorporation, inextricably linked to the necessary relief that is or is not provided by those with the resources and the will to provide, or withhold, that relief. CRS recognizes this condition, historically and in the present, and resists what that control and incorporation mean and produce.

The chapters that follow survey a range of institutions and disciplines that have been tasked with representing refugees, from the law and humanitarian organizations to cultural representations and the educational apparatus to militarism and migration enforcement. By focusing first on law, then on humanitarianism, and then on cultural representations, this book examines strategically how each of these key fields has made refugees into the objects of their disciplinary gazes. In coming to terms with each of these processes of objectification, it illuminates the ways in which refugee agency and epistemologies both draw on and exceed each of these three disciplines. As a field, CRS draws out the limitations, errors, and exclusions of these approaches, and it does so fundamentally rooted in refugee experience and the diverse and complex ways in which that experience uniquely manifests. As such, CRS is a dialectical combination of a critique of extant methods for knowing the refugee and a committed centering of refugee experiences *on refugees' own terms*, leading to a synthesis with grounded and far-reaching implications for change. “Refugee” can thus cease to be an instrument of incorporation and control and of the legitimation of the way things already are and become a means for grasping the lived historical experience of refugees and the compelling desires—political or otherwise—rooted in those experiences.

Departures is designed to bring both clarity and visibility to what has been uncertain and unseen, and complexity and demphasis to what has been oversimplified and hypervisible. Uncertainty and invisibility and oversimplification and hypervisibility have dogged refugees, given the radical diversity of refugees and the one-size-fits-all approaches that they have consistently faced. To return again to the words of Said, quoted above, the modern state created and duly politicized the refugee as such, “suggesting

large herds of innocent and bewildered people requiring urgent international assistance.” The worlds of refugees are much more, and much else, than this politicized bewilderment, innocence, and urgency conjured by the modern state, urgency that ironically can be undermined by the reifying use of statistics and maps and other management metrics by states and their agents. CRS is a way to seize control of image and narrative, by and for refugees, centered in refugee epistemologies and experiences, in ways that enable transformative interventions into legal and political arenas to engage with state structures but not be bound by them. This introductory book contributes to this ongoing project, keenly and necessarily aware of the metrics and definitions that are wielded and disseminated by highly empowered institutions and their agents.

In this volume, the rage, optimism, and “ungratefulness” (chapter 3) of refugees emerge as starting points for new and needed analytics that engage in “epistemic disobedience” of the colonial and unilateral knowledge production about refugees.³ To grasp refugee agency and epistemology, we need to move beyond the official conceptions of urgency, innocence, and bewilderment, along with the “well-founded fear of persecution” (chapter 2), and resolutely toward formations of refugee livability, dignity, and criticality. As an example, refugee ingratitude and what you will read about as “refugee refusal” are points of access to distinctly discernible refugee agency and epistemology that break with the historically appointed role of refugees as seen entirely through a lens of precarity and gratitude. As discussed in chapter 3, in the familiar narrative of “crisis-rescue-gratitude,” refugees have been gifted one capacity: to thank. Soft power, in the guise of humanitarianism, insidiously weaponizes gratitude (for the credited savior) such that any deviation from the unwavering demands placed on those

surviving near-genocide and dispossession can only register as unintelligibility and/or vilification—as the ingratitude, backwardness, and ignorance of the pitifully traumatized. In this context, “refugee refusal” constitutes a process far more fraught and complex than can be explained as sellout opportunism, or doleful moral suasion, or conscientious disengagement. In any of these flow-chart vectors, rational-choice calculation would be projected onto refugees, not in an effort to understand refugees, but more fundamentally to reaffirm the supremacy of the righteous savior to govern, whose selfhood needs alterity in the form of being thanked. This book recognizes those conditions as structural and historical, as a baseline for critical approaches to become not only possible, but necessary for the decolonial project that refugees manifest. Those refugee manifestations are decolonial insofar as they are evidence of that which political and cultural representation has failed. And these manifestations of “epistemic disobedience” can emerge in diverse forms, such as in narrated experiences collected and disseminated by scholarly investigators and in creative production in the cultural sphere, discursive and otherwise.

To introduce readers to CRS, the central interventions of this book are as follows:

- The identification and critique of key disciplines and institutions that have represented refugees, especially via the law and state apparatuses (mainly in chapters 1 and 2), humanitarianism (mainly in chapter 3), and diverse forms of refugee cultural production (mainly in chapter 4).
- The identification and critique of key ideologies that have dictated and limited what refugees can mean (all four chapters).

- The recognition and appreciation of refugee epistemologies, creativity, and life-sustaining practices (all four chapters).

Together, these interventions recognize refugee life-making in its complexity while pushing against conventions in anthropology, sociology, political science, human rights discourse, and the legal apparatus. Throughout this book, refugee complexity is evident both through (re)examining existing representations and through appreciating refugee-generated articulations.

While the book's chapters ostensibly and strategically focus on law, humanitarianism, and culture, their interventions are interwoven throughout to generate a collective analytic that both consistently confronts existing approaches to refugees and demonstrates intersectional interventions that become possible when centering and prioritizing refugee experiences and epistemologies. This centering and prioritizing of refugees is crucial for ensuring that refugees are not treated as a passive and transparent source for content or data for social sciences or for unreconstructed sentimentalism in the cultural sphere.

Critical Refugee Studies as Such

Departures synthesizes and distills the substantial, resonant, and growing scholarly *and* creative work that has begun to cohere as critical refugee studies. Its goal is to articulate the genealogies, methods, and objectives that build and support CRS in an explicit and strategic way. There are at least three related genres that this book may resonate with, though not quite fit exactly: the textbook, the reference book, and the policy brief. Like a textbook, this volume provides an analytical framework, pertinent information, and points

of access for understanding a subject. But the interdisciplinarity of CRS and the diversity of forms it can take resist containment by extant fields. Like a reference book, this volume is a collection of key concepts and historical events and policy manifestations pertinent to CRS. But it is also not explicitly set up along the lines of a unified chronology like a timeline, of conceptual fixity like a dictionary, or of institutional legitimation like a policy analysis. Finally, like a policy brief, this book invokes the formation of pertinent policy and its implementation and has the potential to shape policy because of that. However, unlike a policy brief, these propositions not only address possibilities within established parameters but also call into question those very parameters in order to shift the paradigm toward alternative approaches and epistemologies.

This commitment to bringing about change resonates with existing movements, including their methods and objectives, even if the specificities of refugees may strain the unity and coherence of this new field. So another key function of this volume, especially given its critical dimensions, is to serve as a *re-introduction*, as a way of helping to identify resonant and connected critical approaches that can appreciate the interventions of refugee subjectivity for other fields and methods, movements and communities—a strategic tool for finding a contingent common ground while respecting meaningful differences that cannot and should not be elided. Perhaps an illustrative parallel for such critical and advocacy work would be how the Black Lives Matter movement—invoked in the prologue—has needed to address the premises and implications of those who counter with “all lives matter.” The claim that “all lives matter” has historically served to devalue Black lives by materially and ideologically upholding white supremacy, insidiously expressed as “all lives,” in contradiction to racist slavery, gen-

ocide, colonialism, and persistent inequality in myriad forms. Or in another related context, “all lives matter” is an approach similar to how the shrewd organizers of Proposition 209 a quarter century ago deviously and deceptively called it the “California Civil Rights Initiative,” when in actuality its dismantling of social justice legislation is exactly the opposite of protecting civil rights for the historically and persistently discriminated against. CRS, then, in no small part, is focused on addressing misperceptions, particularly the tokenism and photo-ops that refugees have been subjected to by the powers that be who trot out rescued refugees as evidence of the legitimacy of the world they made and are perpetuating (chapter 4).

Given that *refugee* is a vernacular word in wide circulation as well as a specialized term in highly regulated institutional spaces, *Departures* can be thought of as a primer that can help with the navigation between diverse, intersecting, and divergent conceptions and usages. There are instances when *refugee* is implied or projected onto a situation or person or group while not actually being invoked explicitly, including by the migrant subjects themselves. And there are other instances when *refugee* is actively and conspicuously claimed or eschewed by the state and its political, cultural, and economic institutions.⁴ Accordingly, CRS intervenes in existing and historical uses of the term “refugee,” and much of the first part of this book is rightly devoted to that. Although “refugee” is a term that can, and frequently does, evoke emotional responses, such as sorrow, pity, entitlement, fear, outrage, shame, righteous indignation, and schadenfreude, and much more, CRS demands that we center “refugee” experience, especially that which is in excess of the methods and modes and spaces of meaning and representation in and through which refugees have systematically been cast: historical events (especially war and environmental

conditions), discriminatory policy and legislation, nonsecular persecutions, and other conditions that necessitate flight.

We stand at a crucial moment of refugee uprising and innovation in the face of persistent and renewed perils. A potential resistance to this work comes not just from the xenophobic, cruel, and stingy but also from those who seek validation from assisting those in need, mainly in the form of refugee gratitude and perhaps also refugee forgiveness for “errors” of the past, such as dispossession, conquest, slavery, genocide, exclusion. Being forcibly incorporated into an economy of gratitude has been a defining condition of refugees, a world order for making others look good, or at least less bad (see chapter 3). Such motivations have real consequences; the effective abandonment of concerns is not the answer, as current US practices since at least early 2017 have made widespread. A case in point: the 2017–21 US administration, with its tightening restrictions on the capaciousness of the category “refugee” and with particular viciousness in the recent family-splitting treatment of refugees from Central America fleeing violence, systemic poverty, and persecution and the well-founded fear of it.⁵ These critical analyses of the US state are worthwhile, but they are effectively assessments that center hegemonic institutions—impactful as they clearly are—that are not the sole focus or motivating priority of CRS. Departing from the hegemonic objectification and dehumanization of refugees, CRS is committed to a critical analysis that emerges from the worlds and epistemologies of refugees. This shifted focus does not replace existing, institution-focused approaches, and it is also not invested in the preservation or undermining of institutions. If preserving or undermining happens, that is a collateral effect to the more central priority: *allowing the worlds of refugees to be evident, on their own terms, as much as possible.*

We view CRS as an expression and instrument of a movement of diverse constituencies. The particular formation of CRS that led to this volume sprang from a growing network of engaged and interdisciplinary scholars, especially the authors of this volume who initially convened at the University of California Humanities Research Institute (UCHRI) in Irvine in 2015. Through expanded efforts, in part supported by a University of California Office of the President grant (2016–2020), this collective grew to integrate a broader convergence of not only scholars but also artists and community organizers and K–12 students and teachers. A great many of these individuals have direct connections to refugee experiences and communities, and that network represents both traditional and especially emergent disciplines, in formal training as well as in current faculty positions, all committed to examining how the putative urgencies of refugees ironically displace actual refugee agency and epistemologies when empowered institutions exercise their power to manage and represent refugees. It is not a coincidence that this critical work converges with and productively grows out of critical race studies, ethnic studies, Indigenous studies, postcolonial and decolonial studies, gender studies, LGBTQIA+ studies, migration studies, environmental studies, food studies, and area studies, as well as sociology, political science, history, law, religion, philosophy, english, music, dance, comparative literature, film/media, anthropology, and more.

Since 2016, through the efforts of the Critical Refugee Studies Collective, manifestations of CRS work have been diverse. They include numerous community events, multiple academic conferences, a book series in partnership with the University of California Press, an innovative and interactive website (criticalrefugeestudies.com), a flowering of podcasts, a K–12 teaching institute, university

courses across the curriculum, a grants program, art exhibitions, documentaries, ethnographies, dance performances, and more. We hope that this book, which recognizes and identifies the emergence of CRS as a broad-based movement that is both critical and creative, helps and encourages new work that will advance what we express in this volume. Indeed, *Departures* is a way to distill some of the main insights, effective methods, and pertinent materials of this expanding and expansive body of work. We encourage you to consult criticalrefugeestudies.com for more information and material, including details about scores of projects through the grants program, the multimedia story maps, the blog and creative entries from scholars, organizers, and artists, an ever-expanding keywords glossary, and links to further resources.

CRS Methodologies: Re-storying, Feminist Refugee Epistemology, Collaboration

Departing from the asymmetrical representational apparatus that renders refugees hypervisible and invisible, erasing their humanity, heterogeneity, and agency, critical refugee studies introduces new methods to (re)situate refugee epistemologies and lifeworlds at the very center of knowledge production. *Storytelling*—or *re-storying*, to use the Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe’s term—is particularly important for forging a different and needed analytic on refugees. Achebe, who envisions “postcolonial cultures taking shape story by story,” coins the term “re-storying” to name the process of “tak[ing] back the narrative” of “peoples who had been knocked silent by all kinds of dispossession,” in the hope that the re-storying will result in a “balance of stories among the world’s peoples.”⁶ Building on Achebe’s concept, Khatharya Um, who painstakingly