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The Public Eye



**Florida Is the "Tip of the Spear" • DHS's Immigrant Tracking Tech Lays the Ground for Authoritarian Surveillance
Afrikaner Refugees and the White Nationalist Myth that Won't Die • "We Must Fight for Everyone" for Immigrant Justice**

Sixty years ago this October, the 1965 Immigration Act ended racist exclusions and “national origins” quotas (while creating a new Western hemisphere limit), dramatically reshaping U.S. immigration and its politics. In the years to come, a powerful movement emerged from a network of groups founded on White nationalist fears of changing demographics.

As ICE raids tear people from their communities and the Supreme Court clears the way for racial profiling in immigration enforcement, *The Public Eye* is in solidarity with all im/migrants. Our Fall 2025 issue scrutinizes the movement driving these attacks from the White House: the anti-immigrant Right.

Together, our contributors place today's policies in a long history of reactionary efforts to make the U.S. a White-majority country; they also reveal how immigrant scapegoating and criminalization are central to Trump 2.0's authoritarian consolidation of power.

In our first feature, journalist and lawyer Jessica Pishko probes Florida's efforts to be the “tip of the spear” of Trump's “mass deportation” agenda. The state is expanding its role in federal immigration enforcement by pushing more agencies to join a program that empowers officers to act as de facto ICE agents. Under Trump's DHS, Florida's 287(g) expansion deepens the criminalization of immigrants, with consequences for everyone. As Pishko writes (p. 3), “Despite nominal legal prohibitions against racial profiling, it's plain that that is exactly what police are doing.” This effort to make deportations part of everyday life creates, as one rights defender describes it, “the feeling of a police state.”

Alongside increased policing, Trump 2.0 greatly restricts immigration to the U.S., with one notable exception. In our second feature, anthropologist Sophie Bjork-James examines the White nationalist ideas behind the administration's admission of White Afrikaners as “refugees” to the U.S. Looking at how narratives of anti-White persecution and genocide reframe White people as victims, she reveals the racial anxieties that fuel today's anti-immigrant politics. As Bjork-James writes (p. 12), “Stories of White victimhood rest on this understanding that Whiteness is inherently fragile and in need of protection.”

In our commentary, scholar Anita Say Chan connects the history of anti-immigrant eugenics to DHS's tech-driven surveillance of immigrants. As she writes (p. 8), “The Trump regime's anti-immigrant strategy builds from this 19th century movement's playbook, using its tactics to design a system for immigrant surveillance and containment that already appears to be expanding for wider political repression.”

Immigrant detention is a “testing ground for authoritarianism,” as writer and organizer Silky Shah wrote earlier this year, and discusses in this issue's Q&A (p. 17). PRA researcher Ethan Fauré speaks with Shah, the author of *Unbuild Walls: Why Immigrant Justice Needs Abolition*, about the history of the U.S. detention and deportation system, the administration's recent anti-immigrant escalations, and insights for resistance.

Our cover features a beautiful watercolor illustration by artist Rob Trujillo. In *The Art of Activism (back cover)*, he speaks with PRA about art as a medium for resistance and global solidarity.

As always, between print issues of *The Public Eye*, visit politicalresearch.org and religiondispatches.org for more of PRA's research and reporting on the Right.

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BY JESSICA PISHKO

Florida Is the “Tip of the Spear”

How 287(g) Expansion Fuels Mass Deportations



A collage of a protestor against Alligator Alcatraz, Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents with Kristi Noem, and another protestor against Alligator Alcatraz (Credit: PRA)

In July of this year, Florida Governor Ron DeSantis and his Attorney General James Uthmeier announced the opening of the detention facility they officially named “Alligator Alcatraz,”¹ a nod to Donald Trump’s fascination with re-opening the original Alcatraz prison in San Francisco. The prison was constructed hastily, so much so that people are living in soft-sided structures not intended for long-term habitation. Wholly built and paid for by the state of Florida, the facility is the subject of multiple lawsuits for its environmental disruption and its incursion on Indigenous lands.² DeSantis bragged that the prison was adjacent to a runway, part of a decommissioned airfield that he took over via executive order;³ he envisioned a dystopia where the facility served as a “one-stop shop.”⁴

“Alligator Alcatraz” emerged from a concerted effort by DeSantis’s administration to not just assist but lead the Trump administration’s mass deportation scheme. A few months before the prison

opened, Florida law enforcement agencies cooperated with ICE and DHS in “Operation Tidal Wave,” a “first-of-its kind partnership between federal and state law enforcement organizations” that resulted in approximately 1,120 people disappeared into the deportation machine.⁵

The cooperative component of Tidal Wave resonated with GOP Florida politicians at every level. “I’ve insisted that Florida be the tip of the spear when it comes to state support of federal immigration enforcement,” Florida Governor Ron DeSantis said. Larry Keefe, Florida’s “Public Safety Czar” who leads Florida’s Board of Immigration Enforcement and was best-known for orchestrating flights of immigrants from Florida to Martha’s Vineyard in 2022,⁶ emphasized that Tidal Wave was a “blueprint,” a “warm up” and a “test run” for a “persistent, permanent pressure.”⁷ “Lots of logistics, complexities that would make Amazon delivery or Federal Express blush,” he bragged in a May 1 press conference,⁸ echoing Act-

ing ICE Director Todd Lyons’ comment at the Border Security Expo in April that he hoped mass deportation would be as efficient as “Amazon trying to get your Prime delivery within 24 hours.”⁹ Building on such efforts, Trump’s FEMA has allocated \$608 million for a “detention support grant program” designed to assist other states that hope to emulate Florida.¹⁰

Neither Operation Tidal Wave nor the construction of the Everglades prison could exist without 287(g), a federal immigration enforcement program included as a provision in the Immigration and Nationality Act. 287(g) agreements, described as a “force multiplier” in the lingo of deportation bureaucracy,¹¹ allow local law enforcement to act as de facto ICE agents with minimal training.¹²

Historically, ICE’s 287(g) agreements have relied on two frameworks to advance an “attrition through enforcement” strategy that expands the deportation machine.¹³ The “Jail Enforcement Model” deputizes law enforcement to

act as immigration agents who assess immigration status and cooperate with ICE to send people from the jail to ICE detention. The “Warrant Service Officer” program, added in May 2019, allows state and local officers to serve administrative warrants, thereby arresting people for ICE and turning them over. Both approaches streamlined the process of deporting people who land in county jails, most of which are run by county sheriffs. The logic relied on an assumption that people in county jails were likely guilty of criminal activity. As then-president Barack Obama said in 2014, “If you’re a criminal, you’ll be deported.”¹⁴

But this year has been a departure from the past two decades—even from the draconian immigration policies of Trump’s first term. DHS has reinstated the so-called 287(g) “task force” agreements, a

100 local police departments, the state troopers, Florida Fish and Wildlife, the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, and even the Florida Lottery.¹⁸ At least 11 of Florida’s public universities have also joined the program,¹⁹ including Florida International University, where 63 percent of the students are Hispanic or Latino,²⁰ raising questions about the impact of rising authoritarianism in universities across the country.²¹

What does it look like when local law enforcement officers—who normally patrol the highways, respond to calls for assistance, and investigate serious crimes—decide to concentrate their efforts to locating and arresting immigrants?

Despite nominal legal prohibitions against racial profiling, it’s plain that that is exactly what police are doing.²² Take, for example, the words of Jeffrey Dinise,

Stephen Miller, the architect of Trump’s immigration policy who has touted various theories associated with White supremacy, has been clear that he sees all immigrants, even those in the country under protected legal status, deported.

third, more expansive model that empowers any police officer to detain and arrest people on the street for being potentially deportable immigrants.¹⁵ Even further, despite a lack of legal clarity, “Alligator Alcatraz” itself imprisons immigrants supposedly “under the authority delegated pursuant to section 287(g) of the Immigration and Nationality Act, codified at 8 U.S.C. § 1357(g).”¹⁶ Thus, Florida has interpreted—and the federal government has allowed—287(g) as providing unlimited permission for states to implement “mass deportation” as viciously and violently as they please.

THE FEELING OF A POLICE STATE

While 287(g) programs have exploded in number since Donald Trump became president in January 2025, around 30 percent of those agreements are with Florida law enforcement at the state and local levels.¹⁷ To date, every Florida sheriff’s office has joined the program as well as at least

chief patrol agent in South Florida for U.S. Customs and Border Protection, at a DeSantis press conference about Operation Tidal Wave’s crackdown. Dinise explained that Florida highway patrol officers were watching drivers and how they react to a border patrol vehicle to decide whether to pull them over: “This is how they operate...They’re looking for reactions, reactions from the drivers. First of all, the driver looks over and then looks away and won’t look at them again. Then they vary their speed and move away from that marked unit.” The tactic is one of several used by Florida cops looking for people to deport.²³

Despite the dubious investigatory techniques, DeSantis has claimed repeatedly that the people arrested were all “criminals.” “These are people that should have never been in our country,” he declared,²⁴ echoing propaganda from the Trump administration, which is demonizing immigrants while creating more people el-

igible for deportation by terminating the programs that brought them to the U.S.²⁵

DeSantis’s claims are clearly false. Even the Right-leaning libertarian Cato Institute found that 65 percent of people arrested by ICE operations since October 2024—most now being held in overcrowded detention centers, summarily deported, or, worst of all, potentially disappeared—had no criminal record.²⁶ People with pending asylum cases and even citizens have been arrested.²⁷ In mid-April, Florida’s highway patrol arrested 20-year-old Juan Carlos Lopez-Gomez, a man born in the U.S., and tried to have him deported. Despite evidence of his citizenship—a birth certificate Lopez-Gomez’s mother brought to court to show the presiding judge—the judge said she could not release him.²⁸ (ICE eventually released Lopez-Gomez to his mother in semi-secret, away from the eyes of the media and supporters.²⁹)

Just stating this fact, however, belies the true intention behind “mass deportation”—it does not matter if someone has a criminal record, a green card, or a pending asylum claim. Stephen Miller, the architect of Trump’s immigration policy who has touted various theories associated with White supremacy, has been clear that he sees all immigrants, even those in the country under protected legal status, deported.³⁰ Many people who have been arrested this year had entered legally through state-sanctioned programs. Some have been here for decades. This current mass deportation crisis reveals just how permeable the label of “criminal” is.

Thomas Kennedy of the Florida Immigrant Coalition described the situation in Florida as an attempt to “normalize” mass deportations as “a part of everyday life.” “If they cannot make a police state,” he said, “then they are creating the feeling of a police state.”³¹

A “FORCE MULTIPLIER”

Donald Trump’s “mass deportation” agenda is reshaping law enforcement across the country. Federal agents who typically inspect the mail, ferret out tax fraud, or even investigate federal crimes like child pornography and terrorism are now ordered to focus on deportation arrests.³² Trump’s “Big Beautiful Bill,”

With this criminalization of immigrants, immigration detention expanded and became indistinguishable from jail.

which he signed in early July, allocates \$170 billion in border-enforcement funding to DHS, bolstering ICE's already hefty budget. It also includes money for more officers, more "temporary housing" like the one in the Everglades, and even support for local law enforcement.³³

Part of this is a strategy of shock and awe, enough to persuade people to leave the country voluntarily. Miller has demanded that ICE arrest around 3,000 immigrants a day.³⁴ (Earlier in the year, Trump set this daily quota at 1,200 to 1,500.) To meet this goal, he ordered ICE agents to stake out Home Depot parking lots and 7-11's as good places to sweep away immigrants.³⁵ DHS has spent \$200 million on a "self-deportation" campaign, with advertisements promising \$1,000 to people who voluntarily leave.³⁶

Even with this manpower, money, and executive will, ICE can only hire so many people. Right now, the agency has around 20,000 agents, and Trump's budget bill promises to add another 10,000 over the next four years (if they can find enough people to fill the spots).³⁷ By way of comparison, the Los Angeles Sheriff's Department, the biggest sheriff's office, has around 18,000 sworn officers; Florida alone has 47,000 law enforcement officers across all departments.³⁸ Tapping into all of the law enforcement officers in the country—over a million armed and in uniform—means that every interaction, every traffic stop, every call for help could result in detention and deportation, a fate bound to lead to more deaths, the separation of families, and horrific stories of children missing medical treatment. A police state makes it even more likely that noncitizens will "self-deport," while everyone will feel the constraint on their liberty.

Although the involvement of local law enforcement in federal immigration enforcement is relatively new, it comes from the same nativist ideas that inspired most of America's immigration laws: framing some immigrants as "good workers" and others as "dangerous criminals," with a great deal of fluidity between the two by design.

In 1996, then-president Bill Clinton signed into law the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA), which was heavily influenced by the contemporary anti-immigrant movement.³⁹ The bill was primarily drafted by a lawyer for the Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR), one of a constellation of anti-immigrant groups in a network created by John Tan-ton, a Michigan ophthalmologist and self-taught eugenicist who was inspired by the "zero population growth" movement and White nationalist ideas.⁴⁰ Tan-ton started FAIR and these other groups in the late 1970s and 1980s to seed politics, law, and culture with nativist ideas, in order to "make the restriction of immigration a legitimate position for thinking people," as Stanton put it in a founding proposal.⁴¹

Those efforts culminated in IIRIRA, which made many more people deportable overnight, especially people who were charged or convicted of crimes in the United States, and created the 287(g) program.⁴² Clinton claimed that it would strengthen "the rule of law by cracking down on illegal immigration at the border" without harm to other immigrants who, in contrast, were not breaking laws.⁴³ Alongside other tough-on-crime measures signed into law by Clinton, the criminalization of immigrants increased in the context of a larger war on drugs.⁴⁴

At first, the 287(g) program was not popular because of general anti-federal sentiment. Sheriffs only began to sign 287(g) agreements after 9/11 when then-Attorney General John Ashcroft published a memo suggesting that local law enforcement could, in fact, help enforce immigration law, a reversal of general policy that reserved immigration enforcement for the federal government.⁴⁵ Florida and Alabama were the first states to participate, and the program remained rather small.⁴⁶ At the time, DHS emphasized that the 287(g) program targeted people committing an ever-expanding list of "violent crimes," like human smuggling, drug

smuggling, and money laundering. This emphasis on immigrants who had committed crimes in the U.S. allowed local law enforcement to justify their entanglement with DHS and ICE without considering the overall impact on immigrant communities. Sheriffs could use 287(g) agreements as evidence that they were cracking down on serious crimes.

IIRIRA turned immigrants into "criminals" overnight. Calling the merging of the two the "crimmigration" system, the legal scholar César Cuauhtémoc García Hernández argues that the 1996 law and the "tough-on-crime," perpetual drug war mentality resulted in the detention of hundreds of thousands of people not for criminal reasons, but for civil ones.⁴⁷ Due process protections eroded, new crimes emerged to justify the detention of immigrants, and immigrant families were forced to live in the shadows, with fewer paths to legal citizenship.

With this criminalization of immigrants, immigration detention expanded and became indistinguishable from jail.⁴⁸ People were deprived of their liberty and their ability to see their families or consult with attorneys; they suffered medical neglect, including alleged unwanted sterilizations.⁴⁹ Crammed into overcrowded facilities, they faced violence from their guards, many of whom were employees of for-profit companies who bragged of bolstered profits. Of course, this was also the point—getting immigrants to self-deport because they could no longer tolerate the inhumane conditions of confinement made it easier to remove people from the country without the U.S. government being forced to prove why they could not stay.

The 287(g) program should not be understood as a neutral cooperation agreement, a mere "force multiplier." Anti-immigrant groups in the United States frequently cite 287(g) programs as successes.⁵⁰ The program has long served as a tool in the toolbelt of the most nativist sheriffs, those most prone to blatantly using racial profiling. The first sheriffs to use 287(g) were all openly nativist and anti-immigrant;⁵¹ they joined the program not because they were concerned about public safety but because they wanted to help deport people.



Sheriff Joe Arpaio speaking at a Trump rally in Phoenix, Arizona, in 2016 (Credit: Gage Skidmore, Wikimedia.com)

RECRUITING SHERIFFS TO THE CAUSE

FAIR recruited some of the most infamous sheriffs to police immigrants using 287(g), including Maricopa County's then-sheriff, Joe Arpaio, who became the ur-example of how local law enforcement could become deportation agents in their own right.⁵² While it is easy to look at the self-described “toughest sheriff”⁵³ as an exceptional bad actor, Arpaio was immensely assisted by a series of state laws and nativist propaganda that anti-immigrant groups had been seeding for years. In 2006, Arizona passed the first of a series of anti-immigrant state laws.⁵⁴ That same year, FAIR told its members, “Creating coalitions with police and sheriff’s [sic] departments all across the country to confront the issues posed by mass immigration has been a key FAIR goal for many years.”⁵⁵ They were influential in the passage of SB 1070 in 2010, the “The Support Our Law Enforcement and Safe Neighborhoods Act,” better known as the “show me your papers” act. Arpaio ea-

gerly lobbied in favor of the state bill and signed up for the federal 287(g) program. He then used the law as a pretext to send his deputies—paid and volunteer—to seek out immigrants, especially in places where they worked. In one notable incident in 2008, Arpaio invaded the town of Mesa, sending his troops to the public library and City Hall to arrest maintenance and cleaning crews on the night shift. The then-police chief of Mesa, George Gascón, faced off against Arpaio and accused him of showboating for the media.⁵⁶

Arpaio was eventually sued by the Department of Justice as well as immigrant advocates and removed from office by voters, but groups like FAIR were not deterred.⁵⁷ They realized that sheriffs were easier to recruit than other local police.⁵⁸ In 2011, FAIR produced a promotional video for the annual conference for the National Sheriffs’ Association, a group that represents the country’s elected sheriffs. According to FAIR’s annual report that year: “In 2011, we identified

sheriffs who expressed concerns about illegal immigration.”⁵⁹ FAIR staff “met with these sheriffs and their deputies, supplied them with a steady stream of information, [and] established regular conference calls so they could share information and experiences.”⁶⁰

During Trump’s first administration, FAIR representatives emailed sheriffs they thought might be sympathetic to their cause and asked them to join the 287(g) program. Many of them did join.⁶¹ Even when Biden became president, FAIR helped GOP politicians rev anti-immigrant fervor to an ever-present hum. They held massive press conferences with so-called “Angel Families”—relatives of people allegedly killed by immigrants—to argue that immigrants were responsible for everything from traffic accidents, to horrific homicides, to fentanyl overdoses. The drumbeat of propaganda casting all immigrants as criminals or potential criminals overwhelmed social media and right-wing news. Tom Homan

himself helped to run a propaganda operation called Border911 that produced misleading videos of people crossing the U.S.-Mexico border and suggested that they were potentially dangerous.⁶²

Now, the same program is being expanded and used by law enforcement to enforce plainly anti-immigrant and racist

reassure communities that they are only arresting “criminals.”⁶⁷

The proliferation of the 287(g) program also undermines local democracy, as DeSantis’s bullying campaign targets resistance to his plan. In late June of this year, pro-immigrant advocates rallied in Fort Lauderdale, where the National Sheriffs’

Once again, people are being made to disappear into the gaping maw of an insatiable crimmigration machine that both political parties have empowered and Trump has weaponized against everyone. As our civil and political rights erode, we all become suspects.

policies put into motion by key advisors to Donald Trump—Stephen Miller⁶³ and Tom Homan⁶⁴—both of whom have explicit links to FAIR as well as other nativist organizations. Both have also advanced large quantities of nativist propaganda before and as part of their current jobs to justify advancing authoritarianism, in addition to using their links to law enforcement to legitimize their involvement.⁶⁵

USING 287(G) TO ADVANCE AUTHORITARIANISM

Even if Florida cannot recreate a police state, DeSantis and his allies are doing their best to replicate the feeling of one—a feeling that includes a diminishment of everyone’s civil rights and freedom to speak, travel, and live without fear of violence.

The harms of 287(g) are not hypothetical nor exaggerated. The use of local police in immigration enforcement not only grows the detention and deportation machine, it also makes it more difficult for immigrants to go to school and work, negatively impacts the daily lives of immigrants, results in rampant racial profiling, especially of Latino drivers, and creates significant mistrust between immigrants and law enforcement.⁶⁶ With the program’s ramping up, already there have been new reports of people reluctant to call 911 for health emergencies or to report domestic violence, despite some attempts from local law enforcement to

Association held its annual summer conference. They brought a petition from faith group leaders arguing against 287(g) agreements and supporting the rights of immigrants generally. One advocate told the *Miami Herald*, “When you sign one of these agreements, they divide the community and the police...They see each other as enemies.”⁶⁸ Sheriff Alyshia Dyer of Washtenaw County, Michigan, who was elected on a general platform of systemic change and transparency, described 287(g) as “bad policy and bad policing,” but admitted that Florida state leaders had made resistance difficult. In Broward County, for example, the sheriff, who did sign a 287(g) agreement, said that he would not target immigrants who were not accused of crimes. In response, the state attorney general promptly threatened to remove him from office even though he had been duly elected to represent the best interests of the community.⁶⁹

Beyond these specific harms, the failure of prior presidential administrations to eliminate the 287(g) program reflects just how reliant our deportation system is on criminalization and detention to justify its continued existence. Democrats like Barack Obama can implement 287(g) cooperation inside of jails by arguing that they are simply deporting the “worst of the worst.” But these programs are also infinitely flexible and can be transformed into a model for ethnic cleansing.⁷⁰

The anti-immigrant Right is respond-

ing to the political wins of immigrants demanding their rights with propaganda, threats, and legal maneuverings. What we see represents the union of a vast law enforcement structure across the country with a federal government single-mindedly focused on removing immigrants from the U.S. Miller has made it clear that he will create criminals, through cancelled temporary protected status or other work visas, making hundreds of thousands of people potentially deportable overnight.

For too long, the immigration system has persisted because most actors kept much of their work hidden from public view. Now, with ICE’s all-too-public raids, people are being openly disappeared.

Where are these people now? We do not know. There is no complete list of those arrested;⁷¹ nor is it clear what kind of due process they will receive. DeSantis has proposed, and Trump approved, making National Guardsmen immigration judges in order to expedite the docket.⁷² “[Deportations] are not punishments,” he added.⁷³

There is no way to control people entering the country without also controlling those of us who live inside, because limiting immigration always has the effect of limiting civil rights and freedoms for everyone. Not only has the deportation machine become larger and crueler, but more people are being threatened with deportation if not outright exile, including documented residents who represent political causes the federal government does not like.⁷⁴ The GOP has embraced a rabid nativism, notable in its public presentation, but it’s worth remembering that the laws now being used with startling cruelty have historical roots.

Once again, people are being made to disappear into the gaping maw of an insatiable crimmigration machine that both political parties have empowered and Trump has weaponized against everyone. As our civil and political rights erode, we all become suspects.

Jessica Pishko is a journalist and lawyer who has been reporting on the criminal legal system for a decade. Her latest book is The Highest Law in the Land: How the Unchecked Power of Sheriffs Threatens Democracy.

BY ANITA SAY CHAN

DHS's Immigrant Tracking Tech Lays the Ground for Authoritarian Surveillance



Collage of a protest by the #NoTech4ICE campaign, with a background of the Chinese Exclusion Act and a U.S. passport (Credit: PRA)

In February 2025, one month into Trump's second term, his administration's Department of Homeland Security (DHS) launched a \$200 million campaign of television, radio, and online ads addressed to non-citizens and citizens alike. Running internationally and domestically, the ads thrust viewers straight into MAGA 2.0's White nationalist drama and cast an expanded surveillance machine as the star of a crusade to "protect Americans" against an immigrant flood.

"If you do not self-deport, we will hunt you down, arrest you, and deport you," warned Secretary of Homeland Security Kristi Noem in the launch of a new series of campaign videos in April.¹ "You will be fined nearly 1000 dollars a day, imprisoned and deported. You will never return," she threatens in one video, which opens with a series of mugshots of Latino, Black, and Asian men flashing across the screen.² However, Noem also reminds viewers that DHS's newly intensified partnerships with tech companies

have yielded a novel digital documentation option for "good" undocumented immigrants: "[I]f you register using our CBP [Customs and Border Protection] Home app and leave now, you could be allowed to return legally."³ Those who "do what's right"⁴ may still "have an opportunity to return and enjoy our freedom and live the American dream,"⁵ she states. For those who don't, Noem promises, "[W]e will find you and we will deport you. You will never return."⁶

History reminds us that we've seen this dystopian theater play out before. The MAGA Right's tech-driven expansion of U.S. surveillance infrastructures around an invented "immigrant invasion" demands that immigrants register and document themselves within it to prove their worth—and it draws from a bleak legacy of authoritarian conditioning in the U.S. that's over a century old. My book, *Predatory Data: Eugenics in Big Tech and Our Fight for an Independent Future*, traces this history of anti-immigrant monitor-

ing and disinformation in the U.S., to show how anti-immigrant campaigners repeatedly drew from eugenic models of race "science" to stoke fears over immigrants—and democracy itself—as threats to a strong "American" nation.

At the turn of the 20th century, U.S. eugenicists inspired authoritarian leaders of the era by beginning a more than 50-year-long period of eroding democratic protections and rights by exploiting anxieties over immigration. This allowed eugenicists to advance varied policy gains in the U.S. They introduced monitoring and profiling techniques to identify and exclude "contaminating" immigrants, normalizing the use of these instruments before expanding their use to evaluate and contain other "dysgenic" groups who were deemed a "threat" to the nation.⁷ By the mid-20th century, these groups included far more than just immigrants. The Trump regime's anti-immigrant strategy builds from this 19th-century movement's playbook, us-

ing its tactics to design a system for immigrant surveillance and containment that already appears to be expanding for wider political repression.

PROFILING “GOOD IMMIGRANTS,” MONITORING “CRIMINALS”

Decades before the rise of Nazi Germany, eugenic profiling and data collection in the U.S. enabled anti-immigrant campaigners to suspend democratic norms, erode democratic institutions and retract given rights for growing classes of immigrants and U.S.-born citizens alike—all in the name of stopping superior groups’ “race suicide”⁸ and

criminal and immoral, resulting in the first set of U.S. laws aimed at restricting immigration of a specific ethnic or national group.¹⁰ With it, the U.S. introduced the world’s first biometric, photographic ID system for tracking immigrants’ cross-continental movements.¹¹ Developed before the general use of passports, the new verification system initially applied to Chinese women seeking U.S. entry, and required they submit photographic and written documentation to verify their moral fitness and prove they were not criminal prostitutes.

Much like DHS’ new CBP App does now

tation while saving U.S. taxpayer dollars and allowing valuable CBP resources to be focused on “the real,” violent criminals. It tells “good immigrants” to submit themselves to the state’s scrutiny, and tells them in the process, they can document themselves *and* their ability to make the right choices for America. Like the photoshopped images of Kilmar Abrego Garcia’s tattooed fist used by the MAGA Right to “prove” alleged gang membership, this claim operates on the preposterous premise that monitoring will uncover “real evidence” to distinguish “true” criminals. But the dystopian bargain underpins a dark process already underway to make deportation—as acting ICE Director Todd Lyons grimly put it—“like [Amazon] Prime, but with human beings.”¹⁵

PROFITING FROM XENOPHOBIC PROFILING

Under the Trump administration, ICE’s expanded data collection purports to be more precise in evaluating immigrants and “streamlining selection and apprehension operations” for their so-called “deportation logistics.”¹⁶ Such a project claims to reveal a true “existential threat” to American lives. But like eugenicists before them, the MAGA Right invents an “immigrant threat” that requires heightened monitoring, creating new markets for xenophobic disinformation and profiling tools.

Past anti-immigrant campaigners profited from churning out eugenic disinformation. By the turn of the century, hundreds of U.S. universities¹⁷ were teaching eugenics, helping spur a “golden age of eugenics publishing”¹⁸ that spread eugenic conspiracy theories on the “alien invasion” and national “mongrelization.”¹⁹ Their ideas became so popular that famed eugenicist Madison Grant’s *The Passing of the Great Race* (1916)—which warned that immigrant dangers beyond the Chinese threatened to exterminate superior American classes—sold eight editions and multiple translations, creating a new market for U.S. publishers.²⁰

Anti-immigrant eugenicists also seeded an entire intelligence testing industry that was used to segregate “feeble-minded” from “mentally fit” populations at the border, and later in schools, the military and other public institutions.²¹ The eugenicist Henry Goddard helped institute

Many of today’s racial profiling instruments were developed at the height of eugenics in the late 19th century to curb non-White immigration before being applied to other groups of people in the U.S.

protecting against the rise of “degrading” forces in the U.S. The data economy that underpins the U.S. immigration system began with these ideas and techniques.

Many of today’s racial profiling instruments were developed at the height of eugenics in the late 19th century to curb non-White immigration before being applied to other groups of people in the U.S. This included a national data collection system to monitor movement between (and later within) national borders; biometric databases and photographic ID requirements to identify “criminal types” through racializing assessments of what was visibly marked (or not) on bodies; intelligence and literacy tests to monitor for “feeble-minded” immigrants; and eventually, the forced sterilization of “degrading” populations in more than 30 states, disproportionately impacting Black, Brown, Indigenous, and poor women.⁹ Even as the policies and technologies shifted over time, today’s immigration system developed out of these racist instruments created to supposedly distinguish “criminals” and “inferior” groups from those who were “good” and “deserving.”

The passage of the 1875 Page Act—also known as the first Chinese Exclusion Act—relied on eugenic arguments about “Chinese racial character” as inherently

over a century later, the Page Act required immigrants to register and prove themselves to be “good” immigrants (rather than criminals) by submitting themselves to enhanced scrutiny and evaluation. Chinese women were an easy first target for anti-immigrant campaigners—villainized in eugenic propaganda as prostitutes who were “the source of the most terrible pollution of the blood”¹² and the ruin of respectable White families, they were blamed for an impossible 90 percent of venereal disease cases in cities like San Francisco.¹³ The law was also designed to exclude them—it barred entry to women from “any Oriental country” for presumed “immoral labor.”¹⁴ As a result, in practice the Page Act consistently denied Chinese women entry to the U.S., until the mid-20th century. Even when there was no basis to such eugenic profiling, these monitoring mechanisms reliably produced the data and “evidence” needed to justify groups’ exclusion and expulsion.

DHS’ new CBP Home app dramatizes the vast expansion of the MAGA Right’s monitoring capacities, now anchored around tech industry partnerships to make data profiling operate with more efficiency than ever before. The self-deportation app absurdly sells itself by offering migrants the “safe” option for depor-

these tests as a requirement under the U.S.'s 1917 Immigration Act, after deploying biased psychological exams at Ellis Island that led him to conclude that over 80 percent of non-Nordic immigrants were “feeble-minded.”²² Targeting Jewish, southern and eastern European, and Asian immigrants in particular, the biased data helped guarantee that the 1917 and 1924 US immigration acts introduced race-based quotas to increase White immigration from northern Europe, prevent non-Anglo entry,²³ and exclude alcoholics, paupers, and political radicals as newly recognized national threats.

about the Trump administration's new contracts with Big Tech companies like Palantir and Amazon to intensify data collection for deportations. Palantir, the facial recognition company co-founded by tech billionaire and MAGA-funder Peter Thiel, received \$113 million in federal government spending during Trump's first four months in office,²⁷ including a \$30 million contract to build ICE a platform to combine sensitive data obtained by DOGE from agencies like the IRS, SSA, DHS, and USCIS.²⁸ The ImmigrationOS database would integrate formerly discrete public records—in-

eugenics to create a science for profiling talent and genius, pinned his 1865 argument around the assertion that individual character and traits (including alcoholism and laziness) were genetic, and explained higher poverty and crime in certain races. Decrying national welfare policies as artificially preserving inferior weak and poor lives, and “deteriorat[ing] the breed,”³² Galton argued that elites like him should be empowered instead to enforce policies for population monitoring, data collection, and ultimately, social engineering. He enthused that if superior classes were empowered to exercise a program of surveillance and population control, “what a galaxy of genius might we not create!”³³

While eugenic disinformation allowed expansive gains in immigration bans at the turn of the century, it proved to be as powerful a tool for conditioning public tolerance for more overtly authoritarian containment measures. Withholding rights for immigrants as a special “threat” justified similar actions to contain other inferior, degrading forces. From 1907 to 1917, eugenic advocacy to legalize forced sterilization for “unfit” populations made rapid gains, with new laws to allow sterilization of convicted criminals, the mentally disabled, and the mentally ill in state custody passed in 15 states.³⁴ California's early passage of such a law allowed twenty thousand individuals to be sterilized between 1909 and 1979—largely working-class, Latinx, Indigenous, and Black women who were incarcerated or in state institutions for disabilities.³⁵

Today, the U.S. Far Right finds in immigration the ideal xenophobic catalyst and legal grey zone to enable authoritarianism's rise. By uniquely allowing for “detention without trial, removal without a public hearing, and surveillance without probable cause,”³⁶ as anthropologist James Greenberg has observed, a weaponized U.S. immigration system enables the MAGA Right to build a system designed for not only immigrant containment, but for expanded political repression and terror.

The history of anti-immigrant campaigning in the U.S. reminds us that the MAGA Right's current campaign will not end with immigrants alone. Despite

DHS might tell us its operations distinguish “good immigrants” from “real criminals,” but history tells us this is a formula for authoritarian conditioning and an ever-expanding national surveillance machine.

MAGA 2.0 is proving once again how intensifying immigrant surveillance can be an expedient for political and financial profit, with markets already surging for immigrant profiling and data on other “threat” classes. Indeed, Trump's recent signing of the One Big Beautiful Bill Act supercharges his administration's anti-immigrant agenda. While it made headlines for its unconscionable tax cuts for the ultra-wealthy while slashing Medicaid and SNAP, the bill included major budget increases for immigration and border enforcement. The \$168 billion immigration appropriation is nearly five times the \$34 billion in funding, and budgets \$5.9 billion for “new technology” toward “cutting-edge border surveillance”²⁴—a single allocation that outstrips the 2025 funding for all other federal law enforcement agencies, including the FBI and IRS.²⁵

This explosive spending supposedly allows the U.S. to reach a goal of deporting 1 million people per year and expand ICE detention capacity to an average daily population of 100,000. Many experts have questioned the feasibility of these numbers, reasoning they would be hard to achieve by targeting immigrants alone.²⁶

Even so, reports have already emerged

cluding tax filings, social security numbers, and immigration status—into a centralized information system to create real-time profiles used to target individuals for detention and deportation. Following reports in May that the Trump administration was in conversation with Palantir for a parallel database to merge American citizens' personal information across government agencies,²⁹ the civil rights organization Mijente noted the tech sector's pattern of experimenting on immigrants for surveillance tech with broader applications: “We have seen Palantir test its technology on immigrant and overpoliced communities over the years. Their next steps show that they are applying what they've learned towards the people at-large.”³⁰

JUSTIFYING SURVEILLANCE, SUSPENDING DEMOCRACY

Against footage played of border-crossing migrants, DHS's ad campaign accuses past “weak politicians” for creating a national immigration “crisis”³¹ that now requires extreme measures to correct. But blaming democratic norms for triggering an expanded surveillance regime is a tactic from eugenics' earliest days. Francis Galton, a cousin to Charles Darwin and the English biostatistician who seeded



President Donald Trump signing the One Big Beautiful Bill Act on July 4, 2025 (Credit: The White House/Wikimedia Commons)

making familiar claims that it will focus on immigrant criminals for deportation, DHS's dragnet has included resident workers, taxpaying neighbors, legal residents, international students, and legally-born citizens.³⁷ Its containment efforts are also evident in sweeping arrests of lawful protestors in sanctuary cities, U.S. judges, and others who are treated as enemies of the state for challenging the regime.³⁸ The inclusion of such individuals in DHS's arrests and deportations shouldn't be taken as an "error" in the system—it's by design. MAGA's anti-immigrant agenda hyper-accelerates state and for-profit surveillance operations without care for process or rights. New privately run ICE detention centers projected for California, Kansas, Michigan, Nevada, New Jersey, New Mexico, Texas and Washington thus are growing without being subject to state inspections or regulations.³⁹

Trump's personal embrace of eugenic profiling is disturbingly evident. His

repeated references to immigrants as carriers of "bad genes" and criminally predisposed are now accompanied by his administration's graphic and dehumanizing depictions of immigrants profiled in arrest videos and mug shots—circulated in online campaigns and on social media—as "animals," "stone cold killers," the "worst people," and the "enemy from within."⁴⁰

Over a hundred years ago, it took a context like the U.S., where immigration patterns were quickly changing national demographics, to realize eugenic ambitions through national systems for surveillance. By projecting immigrants as a threat to a White U.S., eugenicists found a reliable means to stir-up public anxieties, sustaining enough popular support to pass violent population monitoring and control bills for half a century. We now have a chance to stop this cascade from happening again by calling out what this is. DHS might tell us its operations distinguish "good immigrants"

from "real criminals," but history tells us this is a formula for authoritarian conditioning and an ever-expanding national surveillance machine.

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BY SOPHIE BJORK-JAMES

Afrikaner Refugees and the White Nationalist Myth that Won't Die



Collage of a protester in solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement in Pretoria, South Africa, President Cyril Ramaphose and Donald Trump, and Afrikaner protestors in South Africa (Credit: PRA)

At an Oval Office meeting in May 2025, Donald Trump confronted South African President Cyril Ramaphosa with a picture of people carrying body bags. Invoking a central trope of the racist Right, he declared, “These are all white farmers that are being buried.”¹ Ramaphosa hoped the meeting would strengthen relations between their countries after cuts in aid and looming tariffs, but Trump had other ideas.²

Trump held up the image as evidence of the mass killings of White Afrikaners—the descendants of European (mostly Dutch) settlers in South Africa. As he did, President Ramaphosa, prepared for a potentially tense encounter amid trade discussions, looked on placidly while challenging the accuracy of Trump’s depiction of his country in a staged onslaught that recalled Trump’s February 2025 bullying of Ukraine’s President Zelenskyy.³

In fact, Trump’s image was not of “White farmers,” nor were they from South Africa. The original image was a screengrab

from Reuters footage of humanitarian workers attending to the remains of people killed during armed conflict in Goma, Democratic Republic of Congo.

Though it was false, the story of White farmers killed because of racial prejudice perpetuates a narrative of a global persecution against White people that furthers the Trump administration’s anti-immigrant objectives. The Trump Administration offered in February to resettle White South Africans. A press release, written by Tammy Cruce, described Afrikaner refugees as victims of “unjust racial discrimination.”⁴ And in May, days before his meeting with Ramaphosa, he referred to a “genocide” of White farmers being “brutally killed” when defending his administration’s acceptance of 59 Afrikaners as refugees from South Africa.⁵ As historian James Alexander Dun points out, the acceptance of White Afrikaners is a “glaring exception to the general halt [the administration] has put on the entry of people fleeing persecution from

around the world.”⁶ Indeed, residents from the Democratic Republic of Congo, the actual scene of the violent images, were almost universally excluded from the possibility of refugee resettlement in the U.S. following the suspension of the U.S. refugee program shortly after Trump took office.⁷

Many critics of Trumpism will roll their eyes at his Oval Office antics with Ramaphosa as mere shenanigans, pointing to his duplicitous use of the images and the absurdity of the claims of anti-White persecution. Yet such a dismissal ignores the profound danger of the narrative animating these efforts. In this narrative, the world can only be understood through a racial lens, where there exist only racial winners and losers and racism is a zero-sum game. This view prioritizes protecting White racial power, particularly demographic power, above all other issues.

Stories about Afrikaner persecution must be understood within a broader set

of White nationalist beliefs that contend a “race war” is under way against White people. The ideas of “White genocide,” “the great replacement,” and Afrikaner persecution each fit within this narrative of an unfolding global race war that threatens White people existentially. This central myth can motivate White people to adopt antidemocratic ideas and enact or support violence.

Along with foregrounding a key White nationalist myth, the story of global White persecution incites racial insecurities among a broader group of White conservatives in the U.S. by speaking to a widely shared understanding of race as a biological hierarchy while stoking demographic anxieties. Mining this particular view of

online discourse has been key to spreading their ideas to larger audiences. Ideas that were once marginal have now found their way into policy.

White nationalists were early Internet adopters, and as a result, their movement has expanded significantly in scope and reach in the two decades since I started studying and monitoring the online movement. At first, they formed chatrooms through dial-up networks to grow their numbers and influence.⁸ Over the years, they built elaborate digital communities,⁹ spread disinformation,¹⁰ and created their own platforms. But the movement’s ideology remained much the same—a uniquely American brand of anti-Jewish prejudice, anti-Black racism, and anti-immigrant prejudice—and hov-

Fear of changing racial demographics is also linked to increasingly anti-democratic views among White Americans, including support for violence as a means of defending the racial status quo¹⁴ and other antidemocratic ideals. This is particularly true for those aligned with Christian nationalism.¹⁵ Christian nationalism in particular supports a hierarchical view of society, one where Christians and men should be leaders, and in this way challenges the pluralistic values upon which democracies depend.¹⁶ These widespread ideas about Whiteness as a newly persecuted racial group provide a fertile recruiting ground for the expanding White nationalist movement and narratives of racial resentment.

Within this hierarchical thinking, there is always one group on the top doling out suffering and receiving privileges. Importantly, this view of identity is rooted in Whiteness. In *The Great Wells of Democracy*, Manning Marable contrasts White and Black views of freedom. He writes, “‘Freedom’ to white Americans principally has meant the absence of legal restrictions on individual activity and enterprise. By contrast, black Americans have always perceived ‘freedom’ in collective terms, as something achievable by group action and capacity-building. ‘Equality’ to African Americans has meant the elimination of all social deficits between blacks and whites—that is, the eradication of cultural and social stereotypes and patterns of social isolation and group exclusion generated by white structural racism over several centuries.”¹⁷

The visibility of the Black Lives Matter movement and other calls for racial justice provide an opportunity for White people to grapple with the reality of ongoing racial inequality and their responsibility to challenge racism. Changing racial demographics due to differential birth rates and non-White immigration has also been changing the hegemony of Whiteness. However, the White nationalist movement and far-right media provide a competing understanding of contemporary race relations, one that reframes White people not as beneficiaries of centuries of violent supremacy, but instead as innocent victims.

The White nationalist movement and far-right media provide a competing understanding of contemporary race relations, one that reframes White people not as beneficiaries of centuries of violent supremacy, but instead as innocent victims.

race is necessary for understanding the growing reach of conservative and far-right social movements today. This is particularly important for understanding the anti-immigrant movement, which deploys such beliefs to present the country’s changing demographics as a threat, fueling support for anti-immigrant policies. This view of race is crucial to understand the contemporary anti-immigrant movement and its ties to White nationalist ideology.

WHITE NATIONALIST IDEAS ON THE RISE

When Trump spoke about anti-White persecution in South Africa from the Oval Office, he brought a central White nationalist claim to a global audience. While much of the media coverage has focused on the narrative’s falsity and what is and isn’t happening in South Africa, less discussed is what this story says to White audiences in the U.S. For White nationalists, talking about violence against Afrikaners is evidence that a race war is already under way against White people globally—and

ered on the margins of public discourse.¹¹

During the 2010s, the movement began to reach broad audiences, as people all over the world rushed online to participate in social media, developing online presences and identities and spending increasing amounts of time consuming digital content. White nationalists were ready for this moment, as algorithms brought this small movement a virtual megaphone to communicate with audiences previously unimaginable.¹² In the past decade the reach of White nationalism has multiplied.

THE ZERO-SUM GAME OF RACISM

The widespread circulation of White nationalist doctrine today is particularly dangerous, as these ideas interact with understandings of race and racism that extend far beyond the movement. A nationally representative survey of Black and White Americans found that a majority of White people believe that as people of color experience less discrimination, Whites experience more.¹³

Surveys show that many White Americans now believe that decreasing racial prejudice against people of color is correlated with an increase in anti-White prejudice.

WHITE GENOCIDE AND THE BELIEF IN WHITE VICTIMHOOD

While advocating White supremacy, a central objective of the White nationalist movement is to convince other White people that they are actually victims—or potential victims—of what they see as a race war, in which people of color seek to commit genocide against White people. This belief is articulated in the concept of “White genocide,” which gained public attention during Trump’s first presidential campaign when the then-candidate retweeted a post from the Twitter handle “WhiteGenocideTM.”¹⁸ Since then, the idea has dominated White nationalist conversations.¹⁹ One 2016 study found that it had become the most popular term among White nationalists on Twitter (now X).²⁰

In such discussions, the idea of White

Still from “Haunted by apartheid, South Africans join global protests” uploaded by Reuters on June 8, 2020 (Credit: YouTube.com)



genocide is not hyperbole or fantasy but an imminent, existential threat. Take for instance the following post to a White nationalist chat room: “Don’t make me extinct! Why do I have to justify my existence? When someone says they don’t care if whites disappear, point at a white child and say, ‘So you don’t care if she becomes extinct?’ There is no comeback to that.”²¹

The contemporary White nationalist focus on White genocide is a new manifestation of historical efforts to frame White people as racial victims while arguing for the need to grow and cultivate a White population. These efforts at different times have come from social movements and political actors, at times focusing on excluding those dubbed non-White from the U.S. and at others of imploring Whites to reproduce at higher numbers. President Teddy Roosevelt famously warned against the dangers of “race suicide” in a 1905 speech, “On American Motherhood.”²² He warned that declining birthrates among Americans could lead to what he called “race suicide” and framed the duties of motherhood largely as a responsibility to reproduce the race, seeing in the work of motherhood “the foundation of all national happiness and greatness.” While Roosevelt didn’t explicitly reference race in his speech, the concept of “race suicide” was coined by sociologist and eugenicist Edward A. Ross a few years earlier.²³ For Ross, increasing immigration specifically from Asia was threatening the racial make-up of the United States, requiring “collective action.”²⁴ Fear of racial suicide helped to nurture the rebirth of the Ku Klux Klan in the early 20th century, fueling the growth of the Klan into an influential national movement.²⁵ Today, themes of “race suicide” are being articulated anew in the pronatalist movement, which as Gaby Del Valle shows is uniting a new coalition of tech biohackers and conservative Christians.²⁶

The idea of “race suicide” reveals a view of Whiteness as an inherently fragile social phenomenon, which can

be traced to the fact that Whiteness—at least in its settler state varieties—is based on the delicate notion of ethnic purity. In the U.S., Whiteness emerged as a legal category, what legal scholar Cheryl Harris²⁷ describes as a form of property, which secures a variety of both public and private benefits. The perimeters of Whiteness have changed significantly over time,²⁸ representing the fluidity of this concept. This makes Whiteness seem unstable. While the online White nationalist movement has allowed the spread of these radical ideas into far-reaching venues, stories of White victimhood also rest on this understanding that Whiteness is inherently fragile and in need of protection.

PLAYING ON FEARS OF REPLACEMENT

Framing White people as racial victims nurtures a grave misunderstanding that most White Americans already have about contemporary race relations to stoke fear of an existential threat. In so doing, the White nationalist narrative foments the possibility of racist violence against people of color. It also encourages support for anti-immigrant policies presented as protecting White people from non-White immigrants. In this view, non-White immigration is not a product of economic, labor, environmental, and other injustices, but is an active conspiracy to harm White people.

Paul Jackson writes that in the post-war period, “various articulations of the theme that white people are now themselves subject to an ongoing process of cultural genocide, or ethnocide” emerged among a variety of neo-fascist groups.²⁹ This view is a cornerstone of contemporary White Nationalism, epitomized in the work of American neo-Nazi David Lane, who published a book written while in prison whose first chapter was the “White Genocide Manifesto.”³⁰ Lane’s understanding of White genocide is founded on an anti-Jewish conspiracy belief that all Western nations are now secretly controlled by Jews, who are carrying out this supposed anti-White campaign.

French conspiracy theorist Renaud Camus helped popularize these notions through his 2011 book *Le Grand Remplacement*, which took themes from

Lane and the White genocide conspiracy, stripped them of their explicit antisemitism, and provided this view with a new language.³¹ The book argues that immigration policy in France, particularly the immigration of Arabs and Muslims, is an active attack on French culture. The Replacement theory sees immigration as an anti-White attempt to replace Europeans and European descendants with Black and Brown people.

Like the notion of “White genocide,” the “Great Replacement” or “Replacement Theory” helped popularize White nationalist beliefs and bring them to a much larger audience. It is explicitly rooted in a conspiracy that global elites are secretly trying to destroy White culture and White people through non-White immigration.³² While Camus’ work did not blame Jews

the popularity of this conspiracy is that it frames White people as victims while allowing different actors to be blamed for encouraging immigration. Carlson often blamed Democratic lawmakers for trying to “replace” the electorate.

Within this conspiracy, maintaining White demographic dominance is understood not as an effort to maintain White supremacy or White racial power, but to prevent annihilation and to act in racial self-defense.

At the same time that Trump was proclaiming that White South Africans suffered persecution and White Afrikaners were welcomed into the U.S. as refugees, a significant escalation of ICE raids began across the country alongside massive restrictions in refugee and immigration programs.³⁷ These policies are of

nic crime reports,” curated lists purportedly documenting crimes carried out by people of color or Jews against White people.³⁸ All of these are meant to prove that White people are currently under attack from people of color, immigrants, and Jews.

This means there are profoundly different understandings of the meaning of race itself operating on the U.S. Left and the Right, and it is important to understand these differences. For decades social scientists have worked to reframe race as a social—and not a biological—construct, or offered the concept of “racial experience” to understand how race is experienced in interactions, not in biology.³⁹ Race, however, remains popularly understood differently. It not only remains largely seen as a biological category, something the proliferation of genetic ancestry tests no doubt reinforces, but also as a concept entwined in hierarchy.⁴⁰ And it is this inseparability of the concept of race and hierarchy that the discussion about “White genocide” brings to the fore.

Across a variety of White nationalist publications, online chatrooms, and in manifestos published by mass murderers is a consistent understanding that race is a contest for supremacy. Racist stereotypes against people of color are of course rife throughout this movement, but beyond this is a specific understanding that racial categories are not only fixed but in an ongoing fight for dominance. White nationalist publications publish ongoing lists of supposedly anti-White violence conducted by people of color, reports of an anti-White Jewish conspiracy to destroy White people are found across a broad array of White nationalist spaces, and mass shooters declare they are defending themselves through committing murder.⁴¹ Beyond this movement, surveys show that many White Americans now believe that decreasing racial prejudice against people of color is correlated with an increase in anti-White prejudice.⁴²

This understanding of race as a contest for supremacy means that changes in the racial status quo are not seen as a move toward equality but instead as a reshuffling of a hierarchy of privilege. Seeing race as inherently hierar-

At the same time that Trump was proclaiming that White South Africans suffered persecution and White Afrikaners were welcomed into the U.S. as refugees, a significant escalation of ICE raids began across the country alongside massive restrictions in refugee and immigration programs.

explicitly for this conspiracy, many have adapted it to fit within a broader anti-Jewish conspiracy framing Jews as responsible for non-White immigration.

This theory motivates political violence.³³ The Great Replacement was the name the Christchurch shooter gave his manifesto. Demographic decline was listed in the manifesto as a crisis. Several others who have committed acts of racist terrorism have written that their violence was inspired by this conspiracy,³⁴ including the 2018 massacre at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh.³⁵

While inspiring outbursts of violence, this reframing of immigration as a conspiracy to actively “replace” White people has also become popular among a broader conservative movement, inspiring the anti-immigrant movement. A *New York Times* analysis of conservative media personality Tucker Carlson found that he referred to replacement theory in over four hundred episodes of his news show between 2016 and 2021.³⁶ Part of

course connected and shaped by this increasingly popular conspiracy that pernicious groups are seeking actively to replace White people with immigrants of color.

UNDERSTANDING RACE AS A FIGHT FOR SUPREMACY

The concept of White genocide is linked to the idea that a race war is not only imminent but is already here. This belief shows that White nationalists don’t just believe White people and White culture are superior, but they see different racial groups in an ongoing battle for supremacy. According to this logic, there is no peaceful co-existing, no possibility of a multiracial democracy. Instead, there is an ongoing battle between distinct racial groups for supremacy.

An inordinate amount of effort within these digital spaces is focused on generating “evidence” to support this claim that a race war is under way. Various White nationalist websites will catalog lists of “eth-

chical means that antiracist efforts to dismantle systems of White supremacy are understood instead as a move toward persecuting White people. In this view, challenging White privilege makes White people newly vulnerable to racial oppression.

The myth of “White genocide” tells a story of victims and aggressors that justifies anti-immigrant perspectives. It also leaves the actual victims of genocide, or other forms of systemic violence, outside of the story.

The White nationalist view of race as a contest for supremacy is held by a much broader segment of the population. Understanding these differences is a key first step to understanding the profound danger of the White nationalist lies about a race war and developing strategies for countering this trend. This is particularly relevant today as these views are motivating widespread anti-immigrant policy and action. In an increasingly racially diverse United States, these myths encourage White people to support racist policies, oppose immigration and refugee resettlement, and make defending racial power a focus of politics.

DEMOGRAPHIC WARS

Trump’s effort to frame White South Africans as subject to racial violence follows a long history. Allowing a small number of White Afrikaners into the U.S. as racial refugees is symbolic, but it supports an influential story of White victimhood. This story reinforces a view that White people are increasingly subject to racial prejudice and oppression in the U.S. as well—and is used to justify anti-immigrant policies that restrict or block non-White immigration.

Since the launch of his first presidential campaign, Trump has consistently framed immigrants of color as a pernicious threat. In a 2015 speech announcing his presidential run, he warned of immigrants from Mexico, Latin and South America, and “probably” the Middle East crossing the border, saying, “They’re sending people

that have lots of problems, and they’re bringing those problems with us. They’re bringing drugs. They’re bringing crime. They’re rapists. And some, I assume, are good people.”⁴³ More recently, in 2023, he claimed immigrants were “poisoning the blood of our country.”⁴⁴

The second Trump administration has sought to significantly increase deportations of undocumented immigrants and limit programs for migration to the U.S. A planned reorganization of the U.S. State Department would also create an Office of Remigration, coordinating deportations.⁴⁵ This new office would replace an office that had coordinated the movement of people into the country into an office focused on moving people out of it.⁴⁶ “Remigration” is a term popular within the European Far Right to describe efforts to deport non-European immigrants, and in the U.S., as Steven Gardiner argues, “it’s an unabashedly white nationalist idea.”⁴⁷

Immigration restriction and deportation are part of a long history of efforts to make the U.S. a “White majority” country. A century ago, during a national resurgence of KKK activity and nativist sentiment, President Calvin Coolidge signed the Immigration Restriction Act while proclaiming, “America must remain American,” echoing a then-popular KKK phrase, “America for Americans.”⁴⁸ The law imposed a quota system for new immigrants, significantly reducing immigration from Eastern and Southern Europe targeting Jews and Catholics and making legal immigration from other parts of the world nearly impossible. This quota system was in place until a 1965 immigration law that dramatically reshaped the demographics of the U.S. Today’s anti-immigrant policies must be understood within this context as an at-

tempt to maintain White-majority power and dominance.

The myth of “White genocide” tells a story of victims and aggressors that justifies anti-immigrant perspectives. It also leaves the actual victims of genocide, or other forms of systemic violence, outside of the story. This is a myth not only because it is false, but because it reinforces beliefs through the messages it conveys to a general audience. This contest for supremacy portends a danger for the U.S. as it stokes fears among White conservatives about changing racial demographics to incite racial backlash. National survey results show that fear of losing a privileged racial status is eroding democratic principles among White Republicans, in that many respondents say violence may be acceptable in the defense of their way of life.⁴⁹ Such fears can lead to both vigilante violence as well as support for anti-immigrant policies.

As in the photos Trump held up in his Oval Office meeting with Ramaphosa, even when the story is a lie, it still has power to impact policy and politics in profound ways.

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BY ETHAN FAURÉ

“We Must Fight for Everyone” for Immigrant Justice

Author Q&A with Silky Shah on Unbuild Walls



Collage of various protestors against ICE across the United States in 2025 (Credit: PRA)

The first few months of President Trump’s second term has seen a massive escalation in the targeting and imprisonment of immigrants—including renditions to prisons abroad, the abduction of Palestine solidarity activists, and militarized ICE raids on communities.

The administration’s immigration policy relies on decades-old tools—notably, a bill authored by the anti-immigrant movement and signed by President Bill Clinton that created the contemporary deportation machine in the 1990s.¹ But the bipartisan expansion of criminalization, detention, and deportation in the decades since has also spurred vibrant resistance at the intersections of immigrant rights, racial justice, and prison abolition.

In *Unbuild Walls: Why Immigrant Justice Needs Abolition* (Haymarket, 2024), Silky Shah, executive director of Detention Watch Network, presents a history of the immigrant justice movement, drawing on over twenty years of organizing against

the entangled systems of immigration enforcement and the prison industrial complex. Immigrant justice, Shah argues, requires embracing abolitionist principles, to move beyond “comprehensive immigration reform” and other efforts that “[ignore] the economic, political, and racial implications of why our immigration enforcement system operates as it does.”²

Unbuild Walls contains vital context and strategic insights for how to approach the Trump administration’s anti-immigrant authoritarianism. Shah spoke with PRA in July 2025 about developments over the last six months, lessons from decades of organizing, and, of course, the need for an abolitionist approach to immigration that centers ending the criminalization, detention, and deportation of people. This interview is lightly edited for length and clarity.

PRA: What inspired you to write *Unbuild Walls*?

Silky Shah: I’ve been organizing

around immigration since 9/11. I organized in Texas to stop the prison boom after DHS was created. I had connected with groups doing work around the criminal legal system and the prison industrial complex, and people connected with Critical Resistance started to talk about abolition. I embraced the idea and by the time I was thinking about writing this book in 2021, I was really compelled by the history of this work and the vision it presents.

Abolition as a lens and strategy became clearer to me as our strategies against immigration enforcement and detention sharpened in relationship to the Black Lives Matter movement and how much further we could go because of that deeper reckoning with racist policing and mass incarceration. We could do and did so much more. We won a lot of campaigns, but when Biden came in, things started to falter. There were many critical lessons that made it clear why abolition was an essential tool as we figured out how to curb immigrant detention and

move away from this model. It felt like a time to offer those lessons.

We've seen an expansion of literal and metaphorical walls since *Unbuild Walls* was published. How would you situate the last six months in the intertwined evolution of mass incarceration and immigration enforcement detailed in the book?

With the last six months, it's hard not to think about the six months that came before. Especially the 2024 election cycle and how so many Democrats capitulated to the Republicans on immigration policy and narratives. They reinforced a lot of Republican frames: scapegoating immigrants, pushing the idea that immigration is about public safety, harming many years of fighting for immigrant communities. This culminated in January 2025 when Republicans passed the Laken Riley Act³ with Democrats' support. They exploited a tragedy to stoke a

disappeared from their communities.

By March the El Salvador renditions and student detentions revealed how much the last three decades had normalized immigration detention and deportation, making it possible for the Trump administration to weaponize the system and use it as a testing ground for authoritarianism.⁵

It's been accepted for so long that many people don't deserve due process, and since 1996, it's been baked into the law. Recent arguments that "they're not getting due process" are hard for immigrant justice organizers who have long seen that immigrants haven't received due process in many ways. But now the scope is expanded. Targeting people for thought crimes and offshoring people to horrible conditions in El Salvador has made people scared.

This weaponization of the system portends very scary things. We must push back to make sure this isn't normalized.

The strategy of "good" immigrant versus "bad" immigrant ultimately targets all immigrants. We knew that would happen: As abolition teaches us, that's how the system works. If you accept that some people deserve such treatment, they'll expand who's deserving.

moral panic and further extend state control. That bill was the biggest expansion to mandatory detention policy since the 1990s and it set us up for what we've been negotiating for the last six months.

Trump's signing of the Laken Riley Act was followed by executive orders and policy shifts.⁴ Some were expected, like expanding detention using private prisons and county jails. They were already signaling this and that they wouldn't be a check on how detention centers are run. Others were unexpected. The plan for Guantánamo was a bit shocking. It's been used for interdiction, stopping new migrants—but transferring people currently in the U.S. to Guantánamo for immigration proceedings was unprecedented. That was the slippery slope toward sending people to a mega prison in El Salvador. Similarly, there's the detention of students who express solidarity with Palestine, who were

What do these escalations tell us about the administration's anti-immigrant goals and strategy? What impacts are you seeing for immigrant communities and social justice movements more broadly?

These escalations purport to fulfill campaign promises while instilling fear and getting immigrants to self-deport. People are scared. Kids aren't going to school or they're trying to avoid public spaces. There's a long history of U.S. militarization, policing, and imprisonment that's deeply tied to our political economy, but for the everyday person this is a marked shift. *What will speaking out against this mean? How will this affect us?* It feels like that creeping authoritarianism.

At the same time, people are paying attention. They're doing know your rights trainings and working to stop ICE from intervening in local areas. They aren't flinching

in supporting their immigrant community members. We're all in a tenuous space together, trying to push back and gearing up for it getting worse. It's only been six months.

The merger of the criminal legal system and immigration enforcement has been so successful in hiding the system. Under the Obama administration, deportations rose significantly because of that intentional merger. We pushed back by exposing those connections, amid a broader racial justice reckoning led by Black Lives Matter.

The government is still using the criminal legal system. Anyone with a severe criminal conviction is usually turned over to ICE. That's the reality. The lie they're telling you is that they're going after the "worst of the worst," but that's why abolitionists are clear that we must fight for everyone. The strategy of "good" immigrant versus "bad" immigrant ultimately targets all immigrants. We knew that would happen: As abolition teaches us, that's how the system works. If you accept that some people deserve such treatment, they'll expand who's deserving.

How do you balance abolitionist goals with movement and institutional energy directed toward reforms presented as strategic harm reduction in response to anti-immigrant attacks?

Social movements often get siloed without seeing the bigger picture of the work done. So, I may have critiques of certain approaches without fully realizing that even if an organization doesn't share the same end goal, some of their work was important to moving an abolitionist strategy forward, by opening space or bringing people in.

Some people have accepted the calculation that if we make the case for the "good" immigrant, trading off more border militarization and criminalization, that's worth it. But folks who work on detention or enforcement understand the problem with that logic. On the ground, they see the interconnections in their work and are looking to put the pieces together to strategize and organize around them. That was a great thing that came out of writing this book. It helped me feel less siloed. That's what we need to do to work through tensions between abolition and reform. Instead of making assumptions, we need to work with people to think through the impacts of reform. There's an opportunity in people seeing the system for

We don't have to accept as permanent what we have been dealt. We can fight back. The Right's going after sanctuary policy and building more detention in response to our organizing.

what it is. I think this moment under Trump 2.0 is the time for it.

Just days ago Congress passed the largest allocation for immigration enforcement and detention ever. Can you describe the scale of some of these changes and their implications?

There are things we know and things we don't know. What we know is that "traditional" detention—the use of county jails, private prisons, all of that—is going to expand. We've already seen that. In Florida, all county jails now have a contract with ICE.⁶ The U.S. Marshals have some 1,200 contracts to work with county jails across the country and ICE is already using some of those facilities. Much of what I'm arguing in the book is that people who care about immigration should understand the prison system. The growth of prisons over the last forty years enabled the ramping up of immigration detention.

Likewise, immigration enforcement's shifting terrain is starting to change U.S. prisons and policing. We need to understand these intersections. Trump has threatened to send U.S. citizens currently in the Bureau of Prisons to El Salvador too. We're anticipating more uses of military bases and makeshift camps, like the Everglades detention camp expansion they've deemed "Alligator Alcatraz." We'll likely see more of that.

What we don't know includes things like: Will they send more people offshore? Will they send more people to third countries like South Sudan, which we saw the Supreme Court recently allow? What other strategies will the Court support? [Ed. note: Following the Supreme Court ruling, ICE issued a memo allowing officers to deport immigrants to third countries without meaningful assurances they will be safe from persecution and torture.⁷]

We're concerned that this money will be used to ramp up the detention system permanently. We've seen ICE use this ratcheting strategy of overspending their detention budget and pulling money

from FEMA and other agencies to go from 40,000 to 45,000 beds, to get Congress to bail them out and increase their funding. How will this 45 billion dollars [for new detention beds] be spent over four years? If the detention system's capacity grows to 100,000 beds, does that help ICE continue to expand through increased funding?

Your book is also a personal and social movement history of resistance drawing from over twenty years of organizing campaigns to end detention and deportation. What are some insights from that work for organizing under the current regime?

For years I worked in Texas and nationally to stop the expansion of immigration detention. Not much happened in the way of ending detention contracts or stopping a new detention center. Then, we had openings and started to win campaigns. We were ready for it. We spent years doing local work to shift narratives and understand the relationship between immigration and mass incarceration. And we started to win. I hold on to that every day right now. It was a major reason why I wanted to write about it.

We have former DHS Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas saying detention is overused.⁸ He doesn't say something like that in a vacuum. He says it because conditions are shifting with local elected officials responding to movement pressure, leading to places like Illinois⁹ and Oregon¹⁰ having no [dedicated] detention [facilities] anymore.¹¹ These are huge, significant wins. We've done it before and can do it again.

We don't have to accept as permanent what we have been dealt. We can fight back. The Right's going after sanctuary policy and building more detention in response to our organizing. It's not like we win and then we're done. These are dynamic campaigns that will continue and evolve based on our political conditions. There's a lot of possibility, but we must stay vigilant in how we do this work, holding onto the wins while pushing beyond them.

As you note in the book, "the truth is that we have already begun making abolition every day."¹² Something to keep in mind this during such a daunting time.

It's hard because we built those openings in 2020, when people believed more was possible. That feels far away now. Many people are accepting the frames of criminalization, crime, and disposability, making abolitionist scholarship and writing even more important. This is a time for political education and challenging those ideas—not giving in because of how narratives about public safety and national security are moving. For many years, my work has been about fighting for that person who's considered disposable, the "bad immigrant." I'm still reckoning with how much harder this is without a pro-immigrant narrative, even as others lean into notions of immigrant "innocence" and "productivity." But we shouldn't reinforce narratives that lend themselves to personal prejudices—we must really think about how these systems work.

Instead of positioning immigrants as exceptional people who are better than everyone else, we need to understand these attacks as part of the administration's strategy for distracting us from real problems. We need to see that we're all in this together. Otherwise, they can use anti-immigrant narratives to exploit people's anxieties about our health care and housing crises, and the lack of social safety nets. We need to see immigration in a more expansive way, not just the enforcement piece or how DC lobbyists have positioned comprehensive immigration reform. Immigration is connected to so many issues. When we make conditions for people in the U.S. better, we make conditions for immigrants better.

Ethan Fauré is a researcher focusing on movements promoting anti-immigrant, anti-Muslim, and White nationalist ideologies. They joined PRA after working with the Center for New Community for five years, authoring groundbreaking reports on anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim activity in the U.S. Ethan works closely with other researchers, journalists, national organizations, and grassroots activists to deepen their understanding of these forces—informing resistance efforts and their work building power across the country.

Florida Is the “Tip of the Spear”

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The Art of Activism: An Interview with Cover Artist Robert Trujillo



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What drew you to art as a medium of resistance?

When I was a kid, graffiti was the form of artwork I was really obsessed with. I grew up with parents who were activists, and although I heard it and absorbed it, it wasn't something that was a passion of mine. Art was the thing I was passionate about. When I became a teen, I started to see graffiti artists use their art form to talk about some of those same issues my parents were talking about.

What is a source of hope for you in this moment of global resistance?

I think the source of hope for me is people seeing the similarities between themselves and Nepal, or Indonesia, or Palestine, or people in the Congo, or in France. I think connecting the dots gives me hope.

There's so much done in [the U.S.] to insulate people from not only what their tax dollars do but how they are perceived and how their government acts all over the world. Seeing all these cases of people struggling now and in the past and connecting the dots gives me hope.

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