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Review of Mountz's The Death of Asylum: The Hidden Geographies of the Enforcement Archipelago

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Book Review

Review of Mountz, Alison. 2020. *The Death of Asylum: The Hidden Geographies of the Enforcement Archipelago*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

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Asylum is suffering a physical, ontological, and political death according to Alison Mountz in her book *The Death of Asylum: The Hidden Geographies of the Enforcement Archipelago*. Drawing on, among others, Judith Butler and Giorgio Agamben, Mountz substantiates her argument by examining each type of death, with a focus on the theoretical explanations, based on geographic case studies in the enforcement archipelago, including the United States, the European Union, Australia, and Canada. The physical death of asylum connotes the deaths that are experienced by asylum seekers who are caught in the enforcement archipelago, and ontological death is the “impossibility of becoming an asylum seeker” due to the border regimes of the Global North (xxii). Lastly, Mountz argues that political death is citizens’ complacency in government border practices that lead to and obscure the violence and deaths of asylum seekers.

While, at first, the obituary and the framework of death seem overdramatic, the reader is struck by the mounting evidence that Mountz compiles. By examining the three aspects of death theorised by Judith Butler, supported with a wealth of data, Mountz makes a convincing argument for the death of asylum in the wake of the expansion of the enforcement archipelago. Mountz takes up Judith Butler’s call to examine the experiences of those who are “living death or deathly living” (4) within indefinite detention in carceral spaces. Drawing on NGO data and her own field studies, the arguments are relentless in reflecting how the possibility to apply for asylum is shrinking and the actual acceptance of refugee status within the enforcement archipelago becomes impossible.

The book theorises the enforcement archipelago as a metaphor for the countries of the Global North’s expansion and shifting of borders outwards and inwards to control and contribute to the death of asylum by “regulating mobility and punish[ing] uninvited migration” (18). Taking up Agamben’s scholarship on refugee camps and islands moving beyond their geographic locale, Mountz argues that islands inhabit the archipelago as spaces of confinement that encompass spaces and bodies that are haunted by the silence that surround the death of asylum. The conceptualisation of the archipelago and its islands, while esoteric, comes to bear fruit as islands are identified and linked in the chain of state border practices on actual and figurative islands.

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The quality of the theoretical analysis and the original data from fieldwork sites that Mountz draws on makes the book novel in the field of border studies and refugee scholarship. The methodological approach taken by the book examines “daily state practice” (25) from official and unofficial channels using interviews, research with participants, field notes, and archival research. Originally examining Canadian border practices (2006–2008), Mountz then organised the Island Detention Project where she gathered a large catalogue of information from sites associated with the United States, Australia, and the EU’s border practices (2008–2014). Data were gathered in a number of places including Guam, Saipan, Christmas Island, and Lampedusa.

A combination of maps that examine journeys, detention centres, and border deaths reflects numbers and stories in a visual format. The maps break down some of the distance that invisibilises individuals who are subject to the enforcement archipelago when data are conveyed only through a list of figures or place names. Mountz also reprints images from a variety of sources to further contextualise her points, including newspaper headlines, photos of carceral spaces, and boat interceptions.

In tandem with fieldwork and archival research, Mountz also balances the difficult and critical work of examining the geographical differences in the archipelago while also identifying unifying themes of isolation, detention, and the island. Beginning with a general overview of border control throughout the world and moving to precise regional examples, critical border scholars will benefit from the broad review and the theoretical advances that Mountz proposes in the book. NGOs and policy professionals will also benefit not only from the clear picture that Mountz draws but also from the later chapters that theorise how the struggle against the death of asylum has been conducted historically and propose a path forward.

Mountz’s extensive fieldwork and data gathering in regards to mapping deaths throughout the archipelago builds upon current literature to further the discussions of border security and asylum seeking, especially in the realm of spaces that are outside the public purview, such as detention centres on and offshore. The conceptualisation of the death of asylum as three separate spheres adds to the theoretical literature in the area of border studies, providing a useful framework for further research.

The absence of the UK as a specific site in the tracing of the enforcement archipelago is noticeable for border scholars and other experts in the field. Known for its harsh policies and practices, especially in the English context, and being an archipelago in and of itself, the book should have either addressed its place in the enforcement archipelago or the reason it is not examined. However, the book achieves its goal of tracing death thanks to the detailed analysis of other under-discussed geographical places and the last chapters add further depth to this overview as Mountz invokes the importance of the struggle against death. The book leaves the reader with an understanding that, while asylum may be in its last gasping breath, there are those who will not let asylum die quietly and continue to practice resistance in forms such as counting, mapping, remembering, organising, visiting, and protesting these indicators of death.

The Death of Asylum effectively encapsulates the slow death of asylum over the past three decades. The theoretical contributions are robust and the data gathered is extensive and furthers the scholarship on borders. Mountz neatly balances an outline of the treacherous advancement in state practices that has made asylum nearly impossible because of the policies and practices around border security with a recognition that there is, however slim, hope for the future of asylum.