



*What inspired you to write your book **Rightlessness**?*

I didn't see this at the time, but I think living in New York in the years before and after 9/11 had a profound impact on me in general and on my future work in particular. That day was literally incredible—as in it upended what was believable; I could not understand what was happening. At the time it felt like there was no time or space to deal with that incredible weight of what happened.

On the one hand, I had progressive friends who called within hours, railing about U.S. foreign policy. They were of course right, but I just needed to have some space to feel horrified and heartbroken. On the other hand, our government launched its ideological warfare, as well as the full force of the security state, in preparation for what would become an endless war, with practices of permanent detention that accompany it. By the time we opened the Guantanamo camp under the War on Terror, my grief had passed over into anger that my government was torturing and imprisoning hundreds of people ostensibly beyond the reach of legal protections. I knew this was not new, but I needed to understand, specifically, how we got to this terrible predicament.

If you had asked me as an early graduate student, though, I would not have told this origin story. I would have said something about my interests in U.S. racism and imperialism, transnational and comparative frameworks of analysis, and in social approaches to studying the law. All of these factors lie at the roots of our current condition of interminable war and extraordinary state power and violence, but I wanted to know the specific histories and legal developments that led us here.

In general, this is going to sound strange, but I am motivated more by the things that I hate than the things that I love. I want to understand the things that I hate—the proliferation of carceral spaces, detentions, deportations, exclusions, and other forces creating rightlessness—so that we can better understand how to dismantle them effectively and figure out how to build a just and decolonized world in its place.

*Given that **Guantanamo** is still open despite political promises to close it down, what is your hope in the future?*

I of course hope that the Guantanamo prison camp shuts down, that its prisoners are given fair trials and at least the possibility (if not the actuality) of release, and that the U.S. returns Guantanamo Bay to Cuba. Those are all important, achievable goals to keep in sight. At the same time, I also know that closing down Guantanamo does not in fact solve the issues undergirding its existence: U.S. imperialism, racism, military violence, and the capacity of the state to continue creating rightlessness under shifting conditions. So what I really want to see is a future in which we can dismantle these forces of violence and death, while replacing them with the structures we want, like education, health care, housing, food security, and life chances for everyone.

My hope for the future is that all of us get to have one.

The path we are on right now leads to a future worth living for fewer and fewer of us. That inequity in getting to have a livable life also defines our present, as the current Guantanamo prisoners, among many other people subjected to state and capitalist violence, know so well. To me, it seems we are barreling away from the paths that could lead to the future I would like to see. What this means is that we have to get our people together and continue struggling, even if it seems like the challenges are insurmountable. As soon as we stop struggling, we have already lost.

What do you hope students will take away from reading your book?

Rightlessness: Testimony and Redress in U.S. Prison Camps since WWII examines how the U.S. state has continuously created rightless subjects by imprisoning them in camps, even as it has proclaimed itself the world leader of rights domestically and globally. It analyzes this key paradox of U.S. state power by focusing on three camps and the testimonies of their detainees: Japanese American internees who fought for and received redress in the late 1980s, HIV-positive Haitian refugees detained at Guantanamo in the early 1990s, and so-called enemy combatants imprisoned at Guantanamo under the war on terror.

I hope students find the concept of rightlessness and the method of reading testimony useful for their work. In the book, I define rightlessness as the removal from the social and political community that could guarantee their “right to have rights,” as Hannah Arendt noted. Put differently, this community provides the pre-condition for rights to have meaning at all. So, when the U.S. removes certain people from the rest of us by imprisoning them in camps, it renders those people rightless. But what fundamentally defines rightlessness is, in John Beverley’s words, “not mattering, not being worth listening to.” So, my method of closely reading the testimony of these people who don’t matter to us is essential to the argument and to the political commitments of the book. In disregarding their disregard, the book’s attention to these testimonies seeks to shed light not only on the ways we are implicated in the terrible fates of the rightless, but also on how their predicament heralds our collective future unless we do something about it.

Words of advice for students in American Studies?

I totally understand the concerns of students and parents who wonder what kinds of professional training they (or their children) will receive through an education in American studies, which, on its surface, might not seem to offer skills readily translatable to the job market in the way that accounting might. Having said that, I think it’s important to keep the shifting sands of the job market in sight. Even high tech companies need and value the kinds of “soft skills” that American studies fosters, like team work, collaboration, written and spoken communication, and critical problem solving. These are the kinds of skills that machines cannot replicate and will become increasingly important for the future workforce. You can look up a number of recent studies showing that liberal arts education leads to successful careers in a range of fields and to greater job satisfaction in the long run.

What are you working on now?

I am co-editing several upcoming issues of *Radical History Review* that I’m excited about, on “Militarism and Capitalism,” “Radical Histories of Sanctuary,” and “Policing, Justice, and the Radical Imagination.” I’m also continuing to think about immigration issues in the current moment and understanding their deep roots in US histories of racism, nationalism, and imperialism. My long-term project focuses on military outsourcing and its implications for planetary violence and de-democratization.