

Call for Papers: Democracy and the Nature of Familial and Unaccompanied Mobilities in the 21st Century

Location: University of Virginia (Charlottesville, VA)

Dates: April 24–26, 2026

Submission Deadline: March 1, 2026

Format: In-person (limited travel support available)

Keynote: Dr. Lauren Heidbrink, author of *Migranthood: Youth in a New Era of Deportation* (Stanford University Press, 2020) and *Migrant Youth, Transnational Families, and the State: Care and Contested Interests* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014)

Overview

Unaccompanied and familial mobilities to the United States from the Global South constitute one of the most vexing issues for American democracy. Moral and ethical debates surrounding familial migration and child detention underscore shifting civic norms in the U.S. and reveal how changing governance around national security and humanitarian protocols can reproduce inefficiencies across federal administrations. These questions—for example, how to balance legal asylum without constraining the legal system—reflect economic, political, and social factors that produce undocumented status while foregrounding the realities of families and children migrating to the United States. Indeed, according to DHS data reported by USAFacts, the “proportion of encounters of individuals in family units tripled between fiscal years 2020 and 2024 to-date from 11.6% to 35.1% of total encounters,” while children continue to represent a small but significant percentage of the 11 million border encounters (not people) recorded from October 2019–June 2024. The conference—and the edited anthology it will develop—reconsiders familial and unaccompanied migration through the humanities and social sciences. It questions the nature of democratic erosion in relation to the subjection of migrant families and children.

To help better conceive and study the changing nature of migration to the U.S. today, the conference organizers ask:

- How can migrants’ experiences be better analyzed and framed? What barriers emerge around oral history, legal testimony, and cultural representation, and how do these barriers intersect with detention and deportation regimes? How are migrants’ experiences correlatively—and at times causally—related to shifting democratic norms or democratic erosion?
- How does border securitization increasingly seek to deter human mobilities through criminalization and violent arrest, and how are families considering novel risks associated with policy changes?
- How has the “figure” of the (undocumented) migrant—so often conceived as “outside” the democratic institutions afforded to the citizen—become internalized in national discourse?
- How is the “figure” of the undocumented person increasingly transposed across policy, ideology, and rhetoric as a calculus of political persuasion?

Key Themes and Questions

We welcome submissions in the humanities and social sciences that address the following or similar topics:

- Legal and Socio-Economic Histories: How has the *longue durée* of what Adam Goodman calls the “Deportation Machine” shaped contemporary governance and public discourse and come into being?

How are appropriations for ICE determined, and what tensions emerge around funding, stated mission, and operational practice? How are deportation and debt migration linked—materially, legally, and historically?

- Narrative and “Humanization”: What role do textual and photovisual narratives—including oral history, journalism, poetry, documentary, film, and memoir—play in “humanizing” migrant experience? How does liberal humanist compassion operate within and through legal terrain to shape, contour, or even foreclose narratives of migration, detention, and deportation?
- Rights and “Rites”: What is the relationship between asylum rights and the rites and rituals associated with the asylum process? How are legal rights increasingly shorn of adjudication as part of what Lisa Marie Cacho calls “racialized rightlessness”? What strategies are NGOs and migrant networks in Mexico and Central America employing in response to border policy changes and migrant caravans?
- Vulnerability and “Reverse Passage”: How do children and adolescents navigate the “rite of reverse passage,” as Chiara Galli writes, including the strategic use of narrative tropes of childhood in asylum claims? How is the Flores Settlement Agreement being ignored?
- Democracy and the Migrant: In what ways does the erosion of asylum and refugee rights correspond to the erosion of rights for U.S. citizens?
- Post-Deportation History: How are people—both in the U.S. (including mixed-status families) and in Latin America—living with, responding to, and narrating deportation?

Publication Opportunity

Select papers presented at the conference will be invited for inclusion in an inaugural, critical public-facing anthology. This volume aims to hone new theoretical and practical paradigms for both academic and general audiences.

Funding

Honoraria will be provided. For presenters traveling to Charlottesville from more than 100 miles away, a \$400 travel stipend will be provided (priority given to those traveling from outside the Richmond–Charlottesville region). Additional funds may be available for local presenters upon request if budget permits but cannot be guaranteed. Breakfast / lunch will be provided.

Submission Guidelines

Please submit (1) an inquiry or a 200–250 word abstract with “Migration Abstract” in the subject line and (2) a CV to Levi Vonk (levivonk@virginia.edu) and John Kennedy Godoy (john.kennedy@colorado.edu) by February 20, 2026. We particularly encourage submissions from emergent scholars, activists, and leading experts in critical migration studies, and welcome inquiries and questions. Presentations are anticipated to be 15~ minutes long. Notifications will be sent by March 15, 2026.