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## Feminist Approaches to Border Studies and Gender Violence: Family Separation as Reproductive Injustice

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In 2018, Attorney General Jeff Sessions and Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) Director Thomas Homan announced that the Trump administration would adopt a “zero-tolerance” policy for anyone, even families, crossing into the United States illegally (Bogen). One result of the policy was the separation of families. Sessions publicly stated, “If you are smuggling a child, then we will prosecute you and that child will be separated from you as required by law” (Lind). According to the Department of Homeland Security, more than 650 children were separated from their families and placed in detention centers within two weeks of the policy’s launch without notification to parents of their children’s whereabouts (Barnes). Currently, there are almost 13,000 detained children in the United States (Flores and Barahona-Lopez) facing pharmaceutical and chemical abuse, reported sexual abuse (Honarvar; Neuman), and placement with foster families without parental consent. Combined, these instances exemplify the current context of gendered reproductive violence at the U.S.–Mexico border. In this essay, I argue that family separation is a form of gendered reproductive violence and consider how both feminist theories and border theories could be utilized in conjunction to illuminate the contours of migrant human rights violations at the U.S.–Mexico border.

### Border theories and feminist theories

An analysis of migrant family separation at the U.S.–Mexico border as a form of reproductive violence is incomplete without an interdisciplinary blending of border theories and feminist theories. Border theories provide a framework for scholars to analyze the discursive, geopolitical, geospatial, and militarized contours of the U.S.–Mexico border. At a macro level, the upsurge in wars, national violence, and poverty in El Salvador and Guatemala, wars which were supported by the United States and its intelligence agencies, directly contributed to the need for El Salvadoran and Guatemalan individuals and communities to seek asylum in the United States (Baker-Jordan). From a border theories perspective *and* an intersectionality perspective, an analysis of intertwining of geopolitical, geospatial, and colonialist actions illustrates how institutional, societal, and political structures across borders caused political unrest and economic collapse that necessitated the quest to find asylum. Moreover, a blending of border theories and feminist theories more thoroughly explains family separation as reproductive injustice.

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For example, communication and feminist and women's studies scholars have contributed significant theoretical frameworks including gender violence (Holling; Lozano), intersectionality, and reproductive justice, which together illustrate the need to consider the totality of one's identity and the confluence of internal and external factors that create and sustain this injustice. As Guidotti-Hernández asserts, violence orders how we analyze classed, gendered, racial, and sexual inequalities. Moreover, gender violence theories render visible the relationships among national politics, citizenship, and the actions that support violence against bodies and individuals (Hernández and De Los Santos Upton). In this context, one must consider how a category such as gender could explain and justify violence, particularly against women and children, and consider the nature of gendered violence as occurring within larger social contexts that shape and influence power hierarchies and relations at play. In this moment at the U.S.–Mexico border, with Latin American asylum seekers risking family separation and physical violence, we see the “juxtaposition of nation and violence, or rather, the codification of violence as normalized state practices on the literal bodies of individuals” (Guidotti-Hernández 291).

The inclusion of intersectionality and reproductive justice as theoretical lenses highlights how connected structures such as politics, government actions and policies, and national and international conflicts form a constellation of effects and outcomes on migrant women's bodily autonomy and reproductive rights (Hernández and De Los Santos Upton). Rooted in black feminisms and critical race theory, intersectionality explores women of color's experiences that arise from contexts interrogating identity politics, antidiscrimination, social movement politics, and violence against women (Crenshaw). Intersectionality “attends to both the ways that categorization has facilitated and rationalized social hierarchy and to the institutional and societal structures that have come to reify and reproduce social power” (Bello and Mancini 15). In other words, women of color's experiences cannot be fully understood unless the outcomes of racism, sexism, and classism are seen as operating together.

Reproductive justice is the final theoretical strand that ties together feminist approaches to deconstruct family separation as gendered violence and reproductive injustice. According to Ross and Solinger, reproductive justice is a feminist framework that blends reproductive rights and social justice, highlights sexual autonomy and gender freedom, and advocates for the right *not* to have children, the right to *have* children (and as many as one desires), and the right to parent children in safe and healthy environments. “At the heart of reproductive justice is this claim: all fertile persons and persons who reproduce and become parents require a safe and dignified context for these most fundamental human experiences,” including bodily autonomy, access to health resources, and a living wage in a safe, healthy environment (Ross and Solinger 9). I argue that family separation at the U.S.–Mexico border is a reproductive injustice that requires an interdisciplinary border theories *and* feminist theories approach to truly elucidate the bordered, racial, ethnic, and gendered dynamics at play.

### **Family separation as reproductive injustice**

As mentioned, I situate the violences accompanying migrant family separation at the U.S.–Mexico border as extreme forms of reproductive injustice. Asylum seekers are

framed in government policies, news media discourses, and Trump's press conferences as threats, smugglers, murderers, thieves, and criminals, which justifies the creation and endorsement of American laws to separate families with the worst possible outcomes. The spectrum of reproductive injustice at the U.S.–Mexico border includes the deportation of parents to their respective countries, the mistreatment of pregnant migrant women currently in detention (Vasquez), reports of child pharmaceutical and chemical abuse (Honarvar), reports of child sexual abuse (Neuman), the traumatization of migrant children (Raff), and the transfer of children to the American foster care system while parents are detained or deported with no guarantee of family reunification or plan in place to legally ensure family reunification will occur (Lind).

Trump's zero-tolerance policy and treatment of migrant Latin American families and children is another cog in the historical American machine of racist, assimilationist policies that have separated children of color—black children, Native American children, and Mexican children—from their families over the past several centuries (Love). Family separation, coupled with the historical forced sterilization of Mexican, Native American, and black women (Gutiérrez; Gutiérrez and Fuentes; Lira and Stern; Roberts) under the guise of population control, illustrates how this is a new iteration of the United States' fear of women of color's reproductive capabilities and the birth of children of color because of their perceived threat to the “traditional” white order (Love).

At the children's level, there is no mention of any sort of reparation for the mental health injustices and traumatic experiences which separated migrant children currently face and might face as they grow older and which were instigated and inflicted at the hands of the American government and its immigration officials. Children are jailed in detention cages while they await their fate; in these cages, camps, and government shelters, children are barred from touching siblings, removing an opportunity for them to soothe one another during traumatic times (Barry et al.; Raff). At the maternal level, pregnant women are detained with no legal rules in place to ensure proper access to health care; women are caged and later forcibly separated from their children with no guarantee of family reunification; and women who seek to locate their children are provided with no resources—or are provided with incongruent information to help them locate their children, a process which could take months (Stillman). Thus, in this context, U.S. government-sanctioned separation of asylum-seeking migrant families at the U.S.–Mexico border is reproductive injustice in its most extreme forms: It cages families; it traumatizes children and exposes them to mental and physical risks; and it erodes the central family unit in efforts to defend and protect the “sovereignty” of the United States. The U.S. government under the Trump administration is enacting legal policies to sanction family separation and maternal/child abuse while simultaneously evading acknowledgment of its hand in spearheading wars throughout Latin America that necessitated the need for asylum seeking in the first place.

Any analysis or activist effort that utilizes solely a border studies lens or a feminist lens falls short and does not recognize its full potential. On one hand, border theories can illuminate the racial and ethnic injustices that characterize the history and contemporary state of the U.S.–Mexico border; on the other hand, reproductive justice theories and feminist theories such as intersectionality can illuminate the reproductive and gendered violences that have occurred historically and contemporarily. By utilizing both

sets of epistemological approaches, researchers, educators, and activists alike can work together to engage in coalitions and do intersectionality (Chávez) at the margins and the borders where it is needed most.

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