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Sexual and Gendered Necropolitics at the U.S.-Mexico Border: 'Penetrative Threats' and (Re)production of Nationhood

*Jessica E. Moss**

Abstract: This work conducts a discourse analysis of a selection of photographs from *El Sueño Americano* [the American Dream], a series of 600 photos depicting belongings confiscated at the Mexico-U.S. border, to explore how efforts to secure the United States against (perceived) penetrative and reproductive threats exert gendered and sexual necropolitical regulation, creating threats to migrating people and propagating the dangerous acts which the United States imagines itself as securing against. It points to how borderization to exclude racialized, classed bodies south of the border enmasse is not just implemented by state-brokered policy and subsequent administrative cultures that permit subjecting migrants to physical pain and dehumanizing treatment. Rather, broader participation in sexual and gendered subjugation of migrating people reflect how genderedness, and especially reproductive capabilities, of bodies are an accessible technology through which state-endorsed borderization is taken up by state and nonstate actors alike.

Keywords: Necropolitics, Borderization, Migration, Sexual Violence, National Mythology, Feminist security studies

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Introduction

Postcolonial scholar Achille Mbembe suggests that borderization may be the contemporary form of “negative eugenics”—a way to reduce the existences of certain (classed, raced) people deemed a threat or superfluous to the existence of the dominant group via exclusionary spatial arrangements (Universität zu Köln 2019). Leo R. Chavez’s *Latino Threat Narrative* posits that United States media and political personalities imagine not just demarcation of the U.S. vs Mexican side of the border as constitutive of the United States’ existence, but that the bodies located south of the border are an imagined existential threat against which Americanness is defined (Chavez 2008). Leveraging these theories reveals how the United States’ policy at the southern border places (especially undocumented) migrants traveling through Mexico to the United States in undue threat of bodily harm both enroute (Black & Viales Mora 2021) and in cases of detention (Human Rights Watch 2021). When paired with gender-aware readings of both discursive and material happenings, these analyses reveal how U.S. public officers attempt to regulate the borderlands against perceived penetrative and reproductive threats, and further, how non-government actors on either side of the border take part in regulation via gendered and sexual mechanisms.

This work argues that objects seized along the U.S.–Mexico border for their perceived superfluous or threatening nature reveal how the discourse surrounding a “Latino Threat” against American civilization manifests via attempts to regulate sexual pleasure, promote (white) American reproduction, and sexually subjugate (especially female) migrants. This points to how borderization to exclude racialized,¹ classed bodies south of the border enmasse is not just implemented by state-brokered policy and subsequent administrative cultures that permit, if not endorse, subjecting migrants to physical pain and dehumanizing treatment. Rather, broader participation in necrotic subjugation of migrating people reflects how genderedness, and especially reproductive capabilities, of bodies are an accessible technology through which state-endorsed borderization is taken up.

This work puts Mbembe’s theory of necropolitics in dialogue with analytic insights offered by poststructuralist foreign policy scholar Lene Hansen regarding participation in construction of national (un)belonging by non-state actors and Chavez’s work tracing the co-construction of the U.S.’s reflexive identity, Othering of those south of the border, and (anti-)immigration

¹ This paper borrows from Ahmed (2002)’s work on racialization as a process by which features, such as skin tone, become imbued with meaning across time and space such that race becomes identity. It further notes that, per Ahmed, racialization takes place on bodies as sites of both external categorization and internal processes.

policies. It will also draw from feminist security studies scholars' insights to highlight how securitization of the southern border creates threats to migrating people and propagates the dangerous acts which the United States imagines itself as securing against. It grounds this argument in a discourse analysis of *El Sueño Americano* [the American Dream], a series of 600 photos depicting belongings confiscated at the Mexico-U.S. border, to explore how efforts to secure the United States against (perceived) penetrative and reproductive threats exert gendered and sexual necrotic regulation.

To trace the permeation of hegemonic U.S. discourses, Latin American policies or narratives are not considered, nor are the ways in which borderization is differently enacted on people who fall outside of assumed categories of race, gender, sexuality, and citizenship. It will be shown that the photographer's intended messaging about migrants' individual humanness, a counternarrative, nonetheless reinforces the American assignment of sexual, gender, race, and citizenship categories to the absent possessor. Tracing this ascription limits consideration of migrants' reflexive subjectivities and counternarratives around which alternative readings could form.

The first section overviews secondary literature which traces U.S. nationhood in the counter-construction of an imagined Latin Other and co-occurring militarization of the U.S. southern border. The second overviews its discourse analytic methodology and justifies the selection of material.

The analysis begins by locating the insights of necropolitical theory in the photographs, which both reflect and critique the use of the body to fortify the border. It then broadens necropolitical theory to include nonstate actors as witting or unwitting regulators, putting into view how sexual organs are wielded or subjugated as technologies. It concludes with an overview of the case-study specific insights on the U.S.'s multi-actor borderization and theoretical insights on sexual organs as a technology of borderization.

1. Literature Review: Ideas and Edges

The U.S. borderland as a site of nation-building and human rights abuses is a widely researched topic. Among many existing literature are those focused on the continuity in U.S. border policy among political parties and administrations, showing the origins and coevolution of discourse and policy. This coconstruction of policy and discourse will ground the forthcoming argument that sexual mechanisms of borderization are taken up more broadly due to the circulation of the U.S. national idea as predicated on the dehumanization of a counter-constructed, racialized Latin Other, most saliently embodied in migrants crossing "illegally."

Numerous scholars have already established the link between policing at the border and racialized imaginings of Americanness and citizenship (Heyman 2008). An important continuity for these purposes is the conceptualization of border security as the nation's primary fortification against not just foreign threats (real or perceived), but to "whatever threat happens to appear in the public consciousness," including those taking place within the nation's borders (Massey 2016, 160).

Massey (2016) notes that the southern border is a relatively new construct in both reality and the imagination, tracing its origins to Mexico's independence from Spain in 1821 and legislation drawing Anglo-American settlers into what is now Texas. Because of these historical transformations, race became a clear boundary between the Latin southern populations and Anglo-American Texas, which would later become part of the United States. The border was officially drawn in 1853, territorializing the U.S. to resemble current demarcations. Throughout the twentieth century, the Anglo-American demarcation of the U.S. side of the border was reinforced via (happenstance and incentivized) increases in white migration, and in recent decades, the border has become a "potent political metaphor in American political discourse" (Massey 2016, 161) surrounding imagined potential invasion of the (white) nation.

Policies regulating the border and the identity of both the U.S. and what lies beyond were mutually constituted and reinforced: U.S. Border Patrol was established in 1924, and thereafter people located south of the border were increasingly described as "illegal aliens," a racialized category often generalized to all Latin and/or "Mexican-looking" people regardless of their status. In this sense, the U.S. racial narrative can be seen as "linking Mexican nationality with illegality and perceived 'Mexican' physical appearance as 'Brown' [...] through law enforcement practices and linguistic categories" (Stephen 2012, 88-89).

This Othering is not just discursive: It is reflected in and reinforced by policy. Chavez (2008) notes that linkage between citizenship and race was methodologically instantiated via policies that artificially caused a rapid, semi-artificial increase of "illegal" crossings. In turn, this ratcheted up policy responses cyclically. For instance, the border was militarized during the Great Depression and via a strict quota system thereafter, and unauthorized border crossings steadily increased. By 1985, U.S. President Ronald Reagan claimed undocumented migration was "a threat to national security," which was discursively evangelized through the press, pop culture, and mutually constructed policies, such as a ballooning budget of the U.S. Border Patrol from \$300 million to \$3.8 billion (Massey 2016, 165). Coetymously, media and pundits posited "that Latinos are unwilling or incapable of integrating,

of becoming part of the national community. Rather they are part of an invading force from south of the border that is bent on reconquering land that was formerly theirs (the U.S. southwest) and destroying the American way of life” (Chavez 2008, 2). Taken together, Chavez dubs these mutually reinforcing narratives the Latino Threat Narrative, a notion that Latin populations are unlike other migrating populations on which the U.S. is constructed, but rather constitute a threatening Other against which the U.S. both defines and defends itself.

Just as policies and identities were mutually constructed at the U.S. southern border, so too has it served as a site for regulating sexuality. Chavez (2008) traces the perception of a “reproductive” and sexual threat in representations of “out of control” Latina fertility (supposedly promoted by Catholic family traditions) and Latin children as a threat to U.S. nationhood, even though statistics suggest Latin American immigrants have around the same number of, if not fewer, children in the U.S. compared to their Anglo-Saxon American counterparts (Chavez 2008, 16). Luibhéid (2002) has linked the control of female sexualities with immigration policies, such as regulations to distinguish immigrant prostitutes from wives via the establishment of spousal naturalization laws. I further note how U.S. immigration privileges reunification of blood relatives over other forms of kinship.² These policies link sexuality-based immigration exclusion to a national grouping premised on sexual, gender, racial, and class norms intended to increase security for Anglo-American bodies north of the border but, as feminist security scholars argue, are predicated on the creation of insecurity for classed, uncitizenized, and raced people below it (Mehta & Wibben 2018). For instance, the International Organization for Migration’s Missing Migrants data suggests that more than 6,200 deaths or disappearances have been documented during inter-American migration since 2014 (U.S. Customs and Border Protection 2023). Sixty percent of these deaths were documented on the border between Mexico and the United States alone (IOM Migration Data Portal 2022).³

Other literature examines what conditions migrants’ vulnerability to sexual violence specifically, including legal status hierarchies, the impunity of enforcement agents, and shifts in the degree of militarization of the border. Taking up the work of Beverly Allen (1996), Sylvanna Falcon (2001) argues that the use of a low intensity conflict doctrine emphasizing national defense, targeting civilian groups instead of territory, and adopting militaristic

² For instance, see the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (2013)’ guide on how U.S. citizens can help their spouses become permanent residents, beginning with fiance visas.

³ See Black and Viales Mora (2021) on deaths and disappearances during migration journeys in North and Central America.

policing tactics creates a climate conducive to rape. She argues that although sexual violence has long served as a “price for entry,” militarization of the border since the 1990s has exacerbated the situation as U.S. Border Patrol agents have collaborated with military personnel to investigate potential drug trafficking, fostering a construction of a racialized enemy and “us/them” mentality that leads to more severe treatment (Falcón 2001, 34).

Falcón’s proof of increased border militarization—Immigration and Naturalization Service often hires those with military past, border agents have wide discretionary power on the job due to remote offices, and especially in the 1990s, many hirees had a criminal background—and its conditioning of sexual violence serves as a point of departure for the following research (Falcón 2001, 43). According to Beverly Allen’s *Rape Warfare* (1996), sexual violence results from “...national insecurity joined with power and immunity, as (especially women’s) bodies become the sites of warfare to enforce or preserve a nation’s (often racial) identity because they ‘symbolize a nation (and its future)’” (Falcón 2001, 34).

In short, U.S. security relies on the insecurity of Others against whom the nation was constructed. As a result, Latin migrants attempting to enter the U.S. are subjects of necropolitical regulation as people deemed unbelonging in both state policy and public discourse.

2. Theory & Methodology

The following section overviews the connection between this work’s poststructuralist perspective and selection of photographic material before describing its discourse analytic methodology.

Hansen (2006) theorizes a relationship between identity and foreign policy, contrasting discourse of the Self against the “counter-construction” of Other(s). To Hansen, identity constructs legitimate policy responses, and vice versa, especially as elite actors attempt to justify policies to the public by making them appear consistent with conceptions of the Self vis-a-vis an external threat (Hansen 2006, 30). If top-down policy and bottom-up identities are mutually constituted, then so too are policies regulating the U.S. southern border and national ideas regarding those living on either side. The seizure of objects at the U.S.-Mexico border may thus point to authorities’ imaginings of the U.S. citizen/national identity, the broader national discourses informing those imaginings, and what subjectivities run counter to them.

Drawing on Hansen’s theory that identity discourses and regulatory policy coevolve, this work takes up her discourse analytic methodology to examine

objects seized by U.S. border control via six photographs taken by Tom Kiefer, a fine arts photographer who served as a part-time janitor at a U.S. Border Patrol facility near Ajo, Arizona between 2003 and 2014. According to Kiefer's website, the objects depicted in his photo series *El Sueño Americano* were confiscated before undocumented migrants crossing into the U.S. were arrested. Confronted with large quantities of belongings, Kiefer eventually received permission from his employers to collect and distribute confiscated food to local food banks in 2007 (Ardam 2020). After six years of collecting discarded items, he began photographing them, and eventually resigned to work on the project full-time (Smithson 2018).

These belongings, confiscated due to their perceived dangerous or unessential nature, were selected because they show the ascription of belonging or unbelonging (regardless of the status of their once-possessor). Moreover, the project drew considerable media attention during the Donald J. Trump presidency, during which time it was exhibited in museums and galleries across the United States as the borderland became a site of political polarization. The project thus captures not just a selection objects and the subjectivity of the citizenized photographer; its palatability to the American public may signal the project's uptake of the dominant discourse, whether a challenge or conformity.

The analysis begins with samples of objects depicted in *El Sueño Americano* to show explicit borderization by agents who seize religious, identification, currency, and other personal items to displace individual migrants' identities and process them enmasse. Then, it explores how certain seizures—of hygiene, subsistence, and sexual health items—reflect the forging of a “deathworld” via both passive allowance of treacherous environmental conditions to harm or kill migrants enroute to the U.S. (as exemplified by *Water Bottles*, n.d. and *Tuny*, 2015), as well as the intentional creation of dehumanizing conditions while in U.S. border detention centers (as exemplified by *Soap*, 2015). It achieves this by first conducting a visual analysis of the photographs—the objects depicted and how they are displayed—through the lens of Mbembe's necropolitical theory. This analysis is contextualized within historical and discursive landscapes found in secondary literature and the photographer's subjectivity as a consciously activist U.S. citizen.

Finally, the analysis takes up Masri (2018)'s work on “Queer Border Objects” to analyze *Condoms* and *Contraceptive*, 2015. It pairs visual analysis with statistics and testimony on sexual violence on both sides of the border to explore how regulation of belonging intersects with and is brokered via bodily regulation, especially focusing on how gendered and sexual violences function as a regulatory tool due to their accessibility to a range of actors.

3. Analysis: Sexual and Gendered Violence as Accessible Borderization Technologies

Mbembe (2003) defines “deathworlds” as “new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of living dead” (Mbembe 2003, 40). The images in *El Sueño Americano* speak to the status of the southern border as a site where necropower⁴ is enacted through subjugation of life via the power of death: personal identification, hygiene, religious, and health items are among those confiscated for being “threatening” or “unnecessary.”⁵ For instance, the photograph *Nuevos Testamentos*, 2014, depicts six Spanish-language Bibles, all of which, according to Kiefer’s website, were confiscated as nonessential personal items during processing (Kiefer n.d.). Similarly, the series depicts confiscated wallets and passports, items bearing personal identification and wealth, further displacing migrants’ individual humanness by processing them enmasse.

Though this systematic confiscation of personal belongings demonstrates borderization via rejecting the humanity of individual migrants, photographs depicting items necessary for the maintenance of life further demonstrate borderization via the creation of “deathworlds” enroute and in detention. *Oral Hygiene*, 2015; *Soap*, 2015; *Tuny*, 2015; and *Water Bottles*, n.d. demonstrate how necropower is inflicted on almost every organ (Mbembe 2019, 100). The first depicts toothpaste tubes piled together; the second, a pile of partly used soap blocks. The third depicts a neat stack of tuna cans, which Kiefer notes are an easy protein-packed meal to carry over long distances. The fourth depicts a collection of water bottles insulated with fabric, which Kiefer states is necessary for preventing evaporation in the hot desert, as the human body requires at least eight gallons a day to sustain life when exposed to high temperatures (Kiefer 2015).

⁴ Mbembe specifically focuses on states’ wielding of necropower to control the life of its citizens, but necropower also includes the exercise of sovereignty via enacting death on those deemed outside the nation.

⁵ U.S. Customs and Border Protection states of its prohibited/restricted items: “The products CBP prevent from entering the United States are those that would injure community health, public safety, American workers, children, or domestic plant and animal life, or those that would defeat our national interests” (U.S. Customs and Border Protection 2023a).

Figure 1: Nuevos Testamentos

Six confiscated Spanish-language bibles symmetrically rest on a piece of cloth.

Figure 1: Tom Kiefer, Nuevos Testamentos, 2014, in El Sueño Americano / The American Dream, ©Tom Kiefer.

Kiefer's symmetrical placement of these objects, which are all similar in shape, size—and in the case of *Tuny* and *Oral Hygiene*, brand—seems to imply the infliction of this policy on masses of similarly symmetrical bodies. Though himself an American who has worked in a border protection center, Kiefer's intention is not to endorse, but to challenge, what he describes as an “injustice” of detention centers which “dehumanize...those entering the US unlawfully” (Diaz 2018). The symmetrical depiction can thus be read as either a critical comment on treatment of migrants as a group rather than individuals, or as Kiefer's own (unintended) submission to the dominant discourse.

In either reading, this collection of items distills U.S. necropower, whereby migrants are not only deprived of personhood via seizure of documents, livelihoods, and personal treasures, but whose organs—mouths, skin, stomachs, kidneys, and throats—are leveraged to regulate migration through discomfort and possible death. The items congeal the treacherousness of the path to the United States during which duct-taping water bottles and

carrying tiny meals would be necessary—a “passive” form of regulation, as U.S. authorities simply don’t interfere with the treacherous terrain.⁶ This appears alongside explicit policy regulations of seizing migrants’ survival tools in detention.⁷ The objects thus compress necropolitics of uncare, passive and active mistreatment, and mass dehumanization. They demonstrate the bio and necrotic methods U.S. border agents leverage to regulate migration via the power of death.



Figure 2, *Oral Hygiene*, 2015; Figure 3, *Soap*, 2015; Figure 4, *Water Bottles*, n.d.; Figure 5, *Tuny*, 2015, in *El Sueño Americano/The American Dream*, ©Tom Kiefer.

Beyond their attachment to unbelonging and/or threatening bodies against which U.S. nationhood is forged and reinforced, the objects depicted in two of the photographs—*Condoms*, 2015 and *Contraceptive*, 2015—also embody the gendered and sexual mechanisms of enforcement, which are leveraged

⁶ See Black and Viales Mora (2021) for more on the treacherous climate and geography.

⁷ For instance, Inda (2020) explores medical mistreatment in border facilities, in which many detainees have been deprived of life-sustaining medications or procedures.

by (or, per Hansen, even precondition the actions of) official and non-state actors alike.

In the case of contraceptive pills, even without knowing the intentions or gendered/sexual identities of the user, statistics regarding the commonality of sexual violence enroute to the United States are well-known; there are numerous cases of smuggling guides enacting sexual violence, and, perhaps lesser-discussed, instances where Border Patrol officers have been accused of sexual violence against migrants, especially (those assumed to be) women. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Office of Refugee Resettlement, 2017 alone saw 1,069 allegations of sexual misconduct involving unaccompanied migrant children in U.S. facilities, 19% of which were perpetrated by adult staff (Administration for Children and Families (ACF), “Report on Sexual Abuse...,” 2023). In documents apprehended by Human Rights Watch under the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP), Border Patrol (BP), and Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) officers have been accused, and in limited cases, criminally tried for sexual abuse.⁸ The FOIA records indicate what advocacy groups have stated for years: that sexual violence is a “systemic problem” in U.S. immigration detention despite a purported “zero-tolerance” policy (Merton and Fialho 2017, 2). According to a report by Community Initiatives for Visiting Immigrants in Confinement (CIVIC) based on documents apprehended by FOIA on sexual assault data in detention facilities from 2010 to 2016, 33,126 complaints were levied against Department of Homeland Security component agencies between January 2010 and July 2016. Of those complaints, 14,693 were lodged against ICE and 10,295 against CBP (Merton and Fialho 2017, 4). In short, sexual violence in detention centers occurs not just among detainees, but also is perpetrated by on-duty officials. Regardless of perpetrator, the threat and experience of violence serve as borderization tactics insofar as they deter entry and create inhumane conditions for migrants who survive the journey.

The U.S.’s necropower constructs this vulnerability to abuse, but participants on either side of the border take part in its maintenance. For a multitude of reasons stemming from a frequent lack of U.S. legal status and possible unfamiliarity with the language and legal system, border-crossing migrants are more vulnerable to violence; even reporting an incident can lead to discovery of one’s legal status and subsequent deportation.⁹ The

⁸ For instance, a 17-year-old girl who was sexually assaulted by a federal officer in a Texas U.S. Customs and Border Protection facility received 128k from the U.S. government in exchange for dropping a suit ACLU filed in 2018 on her behalf (ACLU Northern California 2019).

⁹ This is not just an abstract threat, though threats of retaliation are also part of this matrix

vulnerability afforded to migrating people due to the state's legal status hierarchies condition participation of non-state actors, from smugglers to U.S. citizens and fellow migrants, in forging a deathworld of violence and, thus, (unwittingly) supporting U.S. borderization.



Figure 6, *Condoms*, 2015; Figure 7, *Contraceptive*, 2015, in *El Sueño Americano/The American Dream*, ©Tom Kiefer.

In her queer studies analysis of *Contraceptive*, 2015, Masri (2018) writes that seizure of birth control may thus reflect state complicity in this sexual violence, irrespective of perpetrator, by removing the user's agency over the effects of potential rape (Masri 2018, 11). Testimony supports this conclusion: For instance, one woman crossing the southern border to the U.S. told an advocacy group that women routinely use birth-control pills in anticipation of sexual assault (Falcón 2006, 122), which reflects its commonality. In this way, sexuality and gender, assumed or actual, can be located in the objects as devices enforcing exclusion across actors: the first, (state or nonstate) perpetrators of sexual violence on either side of the border; the second, migrants who must, as a result of the first, regulate their cycles to prevent pregnancy; and the third, U.S. officials who strip migrants of this protection. I further note that hormonal birth control pills may be used to treat a variety of health issues beyond reproductive management: irregular periods, PCOS,

of vulnerability. For instance, a New York Times report states that a sheriff's deputy in San Antonio was charged with sexually assaulting the 4-year-old daughter of an undocumented Guatemalan woman and threatening to have her deported if she reported the abuse. Human Rights Watch has called for strengthening protections against retaliation, deportation or expulsion of migrants who report abuses (Fernandez 2019) (Human Rights Watch 2021).

endometriosis, acne, and low estrogen conditions, to name a few. Thus, having been seized as an unessential or dangerous item demonstrates that migrants' bodily wellbeing and autonomy are subjugated passively and actively to deter entry.

Seizure of hormonal birth control may appear to run counter to the discourse surrounding "out of control" Latina birth rates and the imagining of Latin reproduction in the U.S. as a threat to Anglo-Saxon, white America; after all, taking hormonal birth control reduces the probability of pregnancy after penetrative sex. However, paired with statistics on U.S. agent and citizen-propagated sexual violence, seizure of female contraceptives may serve as a reproductive advantage for the (imagined white) American nation. In this sense, the image of birth control pills highlights statistics regarding sexual violence against migrant women by those on the U.S. side of the border and may even demonstrate one possible means of propagating whiteness at the expense of Latina bodies.

Furthermore, the photographer's choice to depict just one pack of hormonal contraceptives may appear to run counter to the idea of an invading mass, as assumed in the Latino Threat Narrative and critically replicated by Mbembe. The choice of a bright blue, rather than a muted, background color also attempts to "inject humanity into each personal belonging," according to the photographer (Esther 2019). Far from a neutral documentation, this depiction seems to align with Kiefer's intention "to explore the humanity of those who risk their lives crossing the desert into the United States to create a personal connection for the viewer" (Kiefer n.d.). While the use of color encourages this individuated reading, one critic argues that this choice of both medium and color displaces viewers from the objects (and therefore their once-possessor) by offering a "whitewashed" image overlooking the tragic conditions under which the objects were lost (Ardam 2020). In other words, the recognition of individual humanity seems to blunt critique of the dehumanizing conditions from which the objects were brought to viewers.

I add that there should be no need to inject humanity where such humanity already exists. However, Kiefer's color and medium choices may reflect his understanding of his American audience, who, per the dominant discourse, may not automatically see border crossers as individuals. In this way, due to his reported inability to return the objects to their once-possessors, the photographer is left to participate in uptake of migrants' belongings and dedicates his project to redistributing their resources to American viewers. As he describes: "How we treat others is a reflection of who we are" (Smithson 2018). Like the confiscated nourishment redirected to American food banks, the photographed objects nourish American viewers' self-concept.

While migrant women are configured as permissible recipients of sexual violence to be deterred by its commonality, migrant men are configured as penetrating threats to the white nation due to (perceived) sexual deviancy. These can be located, for instance, in Trumpian statements surrounding “Mexicans” as “rapists” in his 2015 speech announcing his presidential bid (“Here’s Donald Trump’s Presidential...” 2015) (Masri 2018). In ignoring the sexual violence against migrants at the southern border and state complicity in such violence while conjuring the image of a sexually aberrant male threatening American women, Trump uses sexual, penetrative discourse to frame undocumented migrant men as invading and corrupting the nation, reproducing the Latino Threat Narrative to exclude bodies deemed undesirable.

Due to sociocultural meanings ascribed to sex, gender, and reproduction, this form of necrotic violence is particularly suited to necropolitical theory due to its potential for extreme psycho-social devastation for victims.¹⁰ To Mbembe, certain conditions of life may be akin to a “living death,” which may contain social aspects (when society does not accept someone as fully human) and/or civil aspects (for instance, loss of civil rights or voice in the public sphere). Though Mbembe roots this idea in the horrors faced by people subjected to plantation slavery, it can be extended to undocumented migrants crossing the U.S. southern border, whose civil rights are depleted due to lacking in legal status, who are exposed to deadly conditions enroute, and whose bodily autonomy (freedom of movement, access to belongings, identity documents, and in more extreme cases, exposure to physical and/or sexual violence) is stripped away. The reproductive “deathworld” located in the images is confirmed by sexual/gender minority migrants’ testimony regarding sexual violence enroute to the United States, in detention centers, and post-arrival. A Guatemalan woman who was repeatedly drugged and raped by a group of smuggling guides post-arrival to the U.S. encapsulated her sense of civil and social death in a precise, horrifying statement: “I think that since they put me in that room, they killed me. They raped us so many times they didn’t see us as human beings anymore” (Fernandez 2019).

Though the Latino Threat Narrative imagines the U.S. to be securing itself against a threat south of the border—especially via stereotypes of Latino men as a penetrative threat seeking to “reconquer” territory and Latina women as a reproductive threat seeking to dismantle the (Anglo-Saxon Protestant) American way of life—the reality is that securitization of the southern

¹⁰ For instance, Savas (2019) describes subtle techniques of necropolitical subjugation (such as social ostracization/stigma) following (perceived) gendered transgressions, similarly locating the living death outside of state institutions.

border rests on subjecting migrants to bodily insecurity and passively and/or actively propagates the same violences which the United States imagines itself as securing against.

Conclusion

This research has explored the gendered, sexual, and reproductive violences inflicted on bodies deemed unbelonging by applying insights of feminist security studies and Mbembe's theory of necropolitics to the photo series *El Sueño Americano*. It has argued that the Latino Threat Narrative manifests beyond speech acts, policy, and administrative cultures that endorse subjecting migrants to physical pain and dehumanizing treatment. Rather, participation in borderization takes place more broadly via gendered/sexual mechanisms. Selectively exploiting and/or repressing reproductive capacities of migrants simultaneously subjugates Latin bodies and propagates whiteness to extinguish a perceived civilizational threat. Because the U.S. passively and actively upholds barely survivable, violent conditions, it tacitly endorses the social death of people migrating from south of the border, smothering the humanity and therefore freedom of movement of people it already imagined as a threat. Enacting necropower to secure the United States simultaneously subjects migrants to bodily insecurity and propagates the dangers—various forms of violence, including rape—which the United States imagines itself as securing against.

This work's theoretical insights can be extended beyond the selected case-study. For instance, it has noted that nonstate actors leverage the vulnerability afforded to migrants, wittingly or unwittingly participating in U.S. borderization. In this way, necropolitical theory should not exclusively refer to the state and modern technologies: nonstate actors who lack advanced surveillance or military technologies may nonetheless leverage more accessible technologies of the body, especially sexual organs, to benefit from and maintain state-sanctioned borderization. Studies of migration and border violence should similarly combine necropolitical theory and feminist security studies to locate the intersection of racial, national, and/or class-based exclusions via gendered and sexual mechanisms.

Further, this work's theory of gendered/sexual necropolitics should be brought to other studies of gender in migration. For instance, Kiefer's photograph of condoms does not invoke ideas of sexual freedom or pleasure, as it may in other contexts: without seeing the body to which the objects belong, the photographs only put into view the power relations from which the dispossessed object is brought to viewers. Sexual acts, especially in

borderzones, can therefore be seen as deriving meaning not from dominant sociocultural ascriptions, but in context: acts that may otherwise invoke ideas of life-giving or pleasure are wielded as technologies of borderization and may thus instead carry a valence of death—both in the bodily sense, in the case of violent rape or medical complications due to pregnancy, in the social sense.

Among the many shortcomings of this work is its focus on exclusively U.S.-endorsed borderization rather than examining the possible intersection of these tactics with the conditions from which migrants flee. Moreover, it overlooks the ways that Latin American states, especially Mexico, may participate in or resist U.S.-sanctioned borderization and/or leverage their own tactics to curtail movement. Its discourse analytic focus on the power relations by which the border objects are obtained ascribes meanings to these materials, potentially stifling the meanings they held to their once-possessor. Finally, its focus on hegemonic discourse surrounding a Latino Threat ignores counternarratives around which alternative readings could form.

Still, this intersectional approach offers a key insight on the nature of the U.S. southern border: reproductive, gendered, and/or sexual violence are key axes along which its borderization is enacted.

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