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Gender and Global Migration

Beyond Western Research

Edited by
Natalia Ribas-Mateos • Saskia Sassen

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9. Desértica Feminista: collision of theories, identity, and [im]migrant–border encounters

Ma. Eugenia Hernández Sánchez and Cynthia Bejarano

1. INTRODUCTION: BORDER COMMUNITIES, DESERT ENCOUNTERS

Feeling and thinking about the U.S.–Mexico border urges one to inhabit a particular space of constant re-elaboration. The border region is a complex cultural and geopolitically significant area that predates nation-states. As this is one of the most unequal borders in the world (Relaño Pastor, 2006), it is a challenge to develop conceptual frameworks that include both the long history that weaves together border communities and the fractures they face, due to current migration policies, security interventions, and the oppression of shared land. Varying migration processes between the U.S. and Mexico have been represented by different historical waves of migration and changing protocols. At times, there has been an emphasis on policing territories; through other periods the focus has shifted to developing long-term policies to reflect a future where control over people's bodies is desired. Other times still, its focus has been the detention of people and their deportation. These are cyclical and episodic tendencies used to create hyper-vigilant, antagonistic, and confrontational affirmation of a migration crisis.

U.S. and Mexican nation-states claim to share an agenda to curb migration, yet this agenda is one that paradoxically deepens transborder experiences, and that, colliding with the desert, nation-state policies, and bodies in movement, creates an Affective Border Community with reverberating consequences. Research on migration shows how "one of the strong impacts of globalization is the increasingly precarious conditions for workers worldwide, which has [a] huge effect on the conditions [in which] contemporary mobilities take place" (Oso & Ribas-Mateos, 2013, p. 3). Our concern is to situate analysis from the specific U.S.–Mexico border to weave with lived experience and knowledge from other regions with a global lens. The increased interest in women, children, and youth who migrate links their harrowing journeys to their countries' histories, and this includes their precarious arrival at their intended destination, for oftentimes they are left near the border, at a deportation site, or abandoned at some precarious place not unlike the place from which they desperately fled. For activists, researchers, and especially for personnel of both government and non-government shelters on either side of the border, this is neither a new nor a recent phenomenon (Hernández Sánchez, 2011).

The man-made construction of the border, its very concept, has acquired different historical meanings for Mexico and the U.S., one that corresponds to each nation-state's project of empire-building and claims to sovereignty. According to González Herrera (2008),

> For the United States, the border became a process of imperial self-affirmation with political, cultural, racial, sanitary, economic, and military traits[. F]or Mexico, the border, in spite of its northern origin based on powerful men from the new regime, remained foreign [and] atypical, and mainly continue[d]

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> to be seen as a space of separation and distance from the powerful neighbor [, creating] a protective vacuum [to safeguard itself from the U.S.]. (p. 15)

This historical construction helps us to understand different dimensions of inequality, as a characteristic naturalized between Mexico and the U.S. These characteristics also contribute to the justification for surveillance and exclusion (Bejarano, 2010). From this multilayered interaction of inequalities (Bustamante, 2000), we cannot avoid asking: what system(s) develop under such contradictory, yet relational inequality? And how can we explore intersecting socio-ecological systems to interrogate the possibilities of life and its threats? At the border, inequality is socially constructed and maintained via xenophobic exclusionary practices naturalized through unequal historical relations built on notions of fear of the unknown, fear of the foreigner, and fear of a hypothetical future in which identification of people's every move occurs, even more so than it already exists. Considering "the U.S. / Mexican border … without doubt [as] one of the most contradictory geopolitical lines in the world—a militarized border with a 'good neighbor'" (Cantú, 2015), we present three intersecting discussions to question and re-imagine the study of the border via collisions of theory, collisions of identity, and migrant–border encounters.

2. DESÈRTICA FEMINISTA AS DESERT GUIDE: INTRODUCING BONDS BETWEEN ECOFEMINISM, BORDER THEORIES, AND AFFECTIVE CARTOGRAPHY

Desértica Feminista is the collision of intimate relations within a system of institutionalized violence, which can be observed in the crossing of the desert, in its risks and opportunities, in the agency to look for a better life and survive. Desèrtica Feminista helps us understand spatial multi-species relations and to gain a communal consciousness of our surrounding environment to resist oppression. Desèrtica Feminista works as a guiding concept that interrogates and provokes analyses concerning the relationship between the institutions of [im]migration that work to obstruct women's agency and mobility (i.e., border patrol, U.S. customs and border protection, U.S. and Mexican military), and the institutions that help foster said agency and mobility ([im]migration advocacy groups). From a Latinx critical perspective, "institutions produce, circulate, and maintain the dominant culture's norms, values, language, policies, and ideologies" (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012, p. 80). As such, we conceptually link Desértica Feminista to the ever-evolving Chihuahua desert. We consider its symbolic landscape, its biodiversity, its socio-historical context as a border space; how it juxtaposes the obstruction of people's movement by security apparatuses across its landscapes (i.e., border patrols) against border communities and other networks of people who advocate for migrants. Both sets of networks (security apparatus versus migrant advocacy and resistance) are embedded within an Affective Border Community that collides and ignites political tensions as the groups work to advocate for or against migrants' movements across borders. The Affective Border Community materializes into tension and conflict, advocacy and agency, in a landscape unfairly singled out as dangerous and barren by those who fail to recognize the hope and support migrants receive and provide here.

Desértica Feminista identifies the locus of this collision by thinking about desert archetypes (a land to continuously dominate), tropes (dangerous, empty, death), and the individuals

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within these tropes. Said individuals either institute these understandings within the stratification of border vigilance systems or work to care for migrants and advocate for their rights in open opposition to nativist narratives of sovereignty. This places desert archetypes and the people encompassing these tropes within a framework that describes the complexities involved in migrant crossings and Affective Border Communities' division. Therefore, the aim of Desértica Feminista is to contribute to discussions regarding the dialectics of the desert; while popular discourse would paint the desert as a harsh, unsafe landscape, filled with systems of surveillance, it is simultaneously a welcoming place for migrants who re-signify it by traversing its ecology and who meet people within networks that work to care and guide them. Together, these systems of contradiction—embedded in desert cultures and landscapes as they are—coalesce as institutions of [im]migration, working either for or against migrants.

Desértica Feminista connects with "a theory in the flesh … where the physical realities of our lives—our skin color, the land or concrete we grew up on, our sexual longings—all fuse to create an attempt to bridge the contradiction in our experience" (Moraga, 1981, p. 23). Desértica Feminista establishes a dialogue between ecofeminism (Cardona, 2016; Adams & Gruen, 2014; Perales Blanco, 2010) and border theory (Bustamante, 2000; Elenes, 2011; Bejarano, 2010) from a lived experience position that describes the desert as a guide between these tropes, as it draws from affect (Ahmed, 2010; Ahmed 2015; Gandhi, 2006) the constant tension between border communities, migrants, border agents, and the desert environment. Drawing from a feminist anti-oppressive research (Brown & Strega, 2005) in which knowledge is socially constructed "that accepts ambivalence and uncertainty" (pp. 255–264), we articulate the challenges presented between the natural environment of the desert and the built environment (McDowell, 1999) of nation-states, and how gender, migration, and landscape interlock (Razack, 2008) to explore a process of both alliance and collision.

3. EXAMINING COLLISION ONE: ECOFEMINISM AND BORDER THEORIES

The crux of Desértica Feminista is the collision between desert ecology and [im]migrant institutions, which is where women have stood at the forefront, challenging the archetypes and tropes at the border. Historically, women have addressed [im]migration, climate change, and other political crises including the exploitation of labor. A paradigm shift in ecofeminism makes its thinking from a perspective of a planet and not only the world. A planet is an ideal place where we acknowledge the connectivity of multiple species [and landscapes]. Contrarily, the world is a place of separation. In this tone, Haraway (2016) challenge us to think "ecojustice, which can also embrace diverse human people, it is high time that feminist exercise leadership in imagination, theory, and action to unravel the ties of both genealogy and kin, and kin and species" (p. 102). Vivar-Arenas (2015) argues, "Ecofeminist positions examine asymmetries [that occur] due to the institutionalized imbalance in the power relations between men and women[,] but also those power relations that are affecting the weak ecological balance that endangers the habitat" (n.p.), thus connecting the social dynamics with place. In this sense, ecofeminism and border theories share a commitment for understanding forms of relational knowledge that stem from the natural environment (the desert in this case) and the built environment (manmade borders) that often go ignored or overlooked. "Ecofeminism emerged as a new strand in feminism and works also for improving [the] living conditions of

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