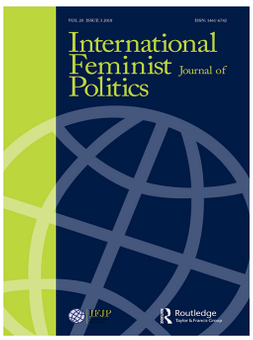

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Border crossings and sexual conquest in the age of neoliberalism in the Sonoran Desert

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ABSTRACT
This article examines the liminal space of the desert borderlands as a scene of routinized sexualized and gendered violence against migrant women border crossers. We explore the human consequences of a philosophy of attrition that is the cornerstone of the US immigration system. Using border sexual conquest and the coloniality of power as lenses, we examine how global neoliberalism represents a form of contemporary conquest that normalizes sexual and gendered violence at transnational locations.

KEYWORDS Conquest; US/Mexico border; neoliberalism; sexual and gendered violence

Introduction

In the spring of 2009, during a visit to the No More Deaths[1] camp near the community of Arivaca in the Sonoran Desert, a well-known migration corridor just south of Tucson, Arizona, our research team was taken to an unsettling site. Through a small dirt path known as a migrant trail, we came to a "changing" area, essentially a space where migrant travelers get ready for the next leg of their journey by changing clothes and leaving unwanted items behind. Here, we saw the disconcerting scene of women's undergarments hanging on the branches of a tree, signifying a "rape tree" (Marroni and Meneses 2006). Seemingly random trees in the desert have come to represent the sexual and physical domination of women by being marked with the remnants of sexual violence.

This article historicizes and contextualizes the rape trees in the Sonoran Desert and the shocking amount of sexual violence against migrant women border crossers (Simmons and Téllez 2014). The US/Mexico border has been built on women's racialized bodies (Castañeda 1993; Guidotti-Hernández 2011) and large numbers of migrants, especially women, continue to be dehumanized and commodified in the region—a reality that can be traced to the current effects of past colonialism, which

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Quijano (2000) describes as the coloniality of power—as well as by contemporary conditions. Neoliberal economic policies encourage the flow of goods across borders and increase the demand for cheap labor, but xenophobic immigration policies discourage the legal movement of people across borders. Workers are commodified and reduced further by being labeled as "illegal," and are subject to a panoply of enforcement and restrictive policies. This stigmatization makes the workers even more vulnerable and more likely to be subject to violence.

As we show, stricter immigration enforcement policies have led to a neoliberal revolution, not just among state and corporate actors, but also in immigrant smuggling operations that further commodify and dehumanize the migrant workers, especially women. While we agree with, and have made similar arguments to other scholars who have found that migrants do indeed have agency in their decision of when and how to migrate (Ochoa O'Leary 2009; Spener 2009; Simmons and Téllez 2014), here we emphasize the role of the neoliberal state in forcing migration, and in creating the conditions of migration and the consequences therein. Neoliberalism thus represents a form of contemporary conquest that routinizes sexual and gendered violence as the price for participating in this system at specific transnational locations (Morales and Bejarano 2009, 425) Processes of sexual and gendered violence that result in rape trees, where sexual violence against migrant women is more of a condition than an event (Simmons and Téllez 2014; Simmons, Menjivar, and Téllez 2015), are the result of interactions between the vestiges of human and economic conquest of colonialism and neoliberal transnationalism. For example, women all along the migrant trail from Central America to the United States, are given the message that they should assume that they will be assaulted. In fact, posters on the walls of migrant shelters tell women that "they can choose to use injectable contraceptives to prevent pregnancy from rape on the journey, and can seek out antiretrovirals to block HIV infection" (Nolen 2017).

Drawing upon both the border sexual conquest (Morales and Bejarano 2009) and coloniality of power frameworks, we theoretically and historically trace the structures that allow violence against migrant women to continue and to be met with impunity, underscoring the subjugation of place. Next, we articulate a critique of recent US border policies and Arizona state policies that seek "to make attrition through enforcement the public policy of all state and local government agencies in Arizona."[2] Together, these further render migrant women border crossers vulnerable. Finally, we present evidence from a qualitative study on sexual violence against migrant women that demonstrates that increased human smuggling has exacerbated the commodification and vulnerability of migrant women through the neoliberalization of human smuggling operations.

Context for migration and sexual violence: colonialism and neoliberalism

The US/Mexico border is deeply marked by its history of colonialism as well as by current neoliberal policies. Certainly, when considering the use of trees known as lynching trees in the Arizona–Sonora Desert during the period of the Yaqui Indian wars (Guidotti-Hernández 2011), we can trace, historically, how the landscape has been and continues to be used to symbolize violence, with actual physical markers of trauma for racialized and sexualized others.[3] The legacies of colonialism have created a racialized, misogynist, commodified (trade- or exchange-oriented) system that intersects with contemporary neoliberal policies and ideologies. These policies have significant deleterious effects across the USA and the Americas, but they have an especially pernicious effect at colonialized borders. There is a disproportionate vulnerability to poor, racialized women who can be "bought and sold."

Quijano (2000) argues that contact between European and American civilizations in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries compelled urgent new debates on race, economics and epistemology. From these debates, contact becomes conquest through the doctrine of discovery (Newcomb 2008). For the first time, race became a rigid hierarchical term to differentiate those who deserved land and wealth from those who did not. Colonial settlers forcefully relegated Indigenous and Black people to the lower rungs of the massive new transatlantic trade in goods and in the budding capitalist system. These racial and economic revolutions required an epistemological re-thinking. Despite abundant contrary evidence, Western European knowledges were now framed as the direct heirs of ancient knowledge, with a more or less straight trajectory drawn from Plato and Aristotle through Christianity to early Modern philosophy.

Coloniality of power framework

By contrast, knowledges that did not fall upon this constructed trajectory were dismissed as not modern enough, with those who held such beliefs being disregarded as savages. The epistemological, capitalist and racial revolutions reinforced each other into a "colonial matrix of power" that has had profound effects. Quijano argues that the vestiges of this colonial, or more accurately conquest-infused thinking continue to affect the lived experiences of peoples in the Americas—although the colonial systems may no longer exist, colonial conditions remain. Maria Lugones (2008) has extended Quijano's work on the coloniality of power to show how the colonial system also erased more fluid and gender-empowering systems of gender, and replaced them with the colonial/modern gender system that is grounded in gender domination. Analyzing the intersections of gender, race, colonization and

capitalism shows that within the matrix of colonialism, women of color and white women are gendered differently; women of color are characterized as sexual deviants or as bodies to be used, whereas white women are virginal, bodies to be protected. Lugones (2008) concludes that until we understand the roots of these gendered structures, we will not be able "to make visible our collaboration with systematic racialized gender violence" (16).

Contemporary experiences of gendered subjugation at the US/Mexico border are also rooted in the colonial history of conflict between two warring countries that ended in 1848, when the two countries drew a political demarcation with the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. US expansionism was intimately tied with the notion of Manifest Destiny, the idea that there existed a preordained, God-given mandate for white, English-speaking Europeans to expand and settle the North American continent (Price 2004). White expansionism and its ideology predicated upon a perceived blankness of the Western landscape that erased Indigenous and Mexican peoples. Once the geopolitical boundary between the US/Mexico border was drawn, it "rendered stark the separation between Anglo-America and a discrete space of otherness, Mexico" (Price 2004, 47). As the territory was formally opened to Anglo-American advancement and settlement overnight, Mexicanos became second-class citizens in a foreign land, although in theory they were US citizens with legal rights to their lands as well as to citizenship (Price 2004). This legacy has continued to mark the ways in which Mexican bodies are perceived, accepted and rejected along the political demarcation of the US/Mexico border and beyond. As Russel y Rodríguez (2000) has argued, the US/Mexico War conquered the Mexican body as well as Mexican land. The zone of conflict continues today, in both the visible engagement of border enforcement officers with migrants and the ways in which the multiple vulnerabilities of migrants are preyed upon. We also want to make clear that patriarchy, misogyny and zero to no accountability towards the assault on women's bodies are functions of *both* nation states —so as not to reproduce the stereotype of human rights violations as cultural pathologies, oftentimes deemed rooted or inherent to "Latin culture" (Fregoso 2012). Instead, we argue that the creation of the US/Mexico border, informed by social and political conditions, has shaped the experiences of violence against women. We further articulate this point in this article.

Maquiladoras and the exploitation of Mexican laborers

Because of economic and national security policies such as the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and increased border enforcement, the past almost twenty-five years has seen a significant shift in border crossing conditions which, in turn, have substantially affected the lives of women who have been compelled to migrate and are now met with increased

vulnerability during the crossing. NAFTA spurred the construction of large numbers of maquiladoras (low-wage industrial factories, usually foreign-owned) along Mexico's border with the USA (Bacon 2014). The prospect of new jobs in a country whose economy was changing from rural to industrial production because of neoliberal policies has made Mexico's northern border an attractive option for displaced rural workers from the interior of the country (Flores 2017). Between 1994 and 2002, 630,000 manufacturing jobs were created in communities along the US/Mexico border (Anderson 2006). Census data collected before the implementation of NAFTA in 1990, compared with population figures collected six years after NAFTA's implementation in 2000 shows a 40 percent population increase in border communities with high border crossing traffic along Mexico's northern border (Anderson 2006).

However, the increase in job opportunities for the many who migrated from the interior of the country to the border with the USA did not guarantee improved living and working conditions. Despite increased foreign investment and job creation through NAFTA, Mexican workers found themselves in similar low-paying jobs in the border maquiladoras, where workers earn one-tenth of what a US worker would make in a day, and only one income index point higher than the rest of Mexico (Anderson 2006). This condition is particularly marked for women workers who are subjugated under a "patriarchal system constituted by unequal gender rights in which men of any class are privileged as men, while women, especially working-class women, are treated as second-class human beings by either their male counterparts or by elite men … " (Lugo 2008, 235).

The destabilization of the Mexican local economy and dismal job opportunities in maquiladoras in Northern Mexico resulted in more Mexicans viewing the USA as a viable option for work opportunities and a chance for a better life. However, cross-border free trade does not apply to people attempting to cross the US/Mexico border. In fact, the issue of opening the border to Mexican migrants was systematically excluded from NAFTA discussions (Adler-Hellman 1994). In this context, the emergence of Operation Gatekeeper in 1994—the same year NAFTA was implemented—at the San Diego/Tijuana crossing point, or Operation Hold the Line at the Ciudad Juarez/El Paso crossing, is not at all paradoxical (Dunn 1996, 2009). Both Operation Gatekeeper and Operation Hold the Line blocked what was considered the easiest and safest passages for migrants entering the USA through its southern border —funneling the movement of migrants into the more harsh region of the Sonoran Desert (Cunningham 2004). Coupled with heavy militarization, this act of deterrence demonstrates the ways in which international demarcation has become increasingly militarized to keep the Mexican migrant workforce out while allowing opportunities for the exploitation of the Mexican workforce in the USA (Andreas 2000; Dunn 1996, 2009; Parenti 1999). We must note that

this strategy has also seeped into the Mexican state with the Programa Frontera Sur and the Merida Initiative—where the USA is heavily supporting the military build-up and deterrence of Central American migrants through Mexico in the name of security.[4] In sum, what this means is that although North American borders have become more porous to the free flow of capital and goods, they are not available to/for the free passage of people, creating environments ripe for exploitation and gendered violence as the price for passage (Sadowski-Smith 2002).

The human impacts of coloniality of power and neoliberalism

The human cost of these acts of deterrence can be seen in the steady increase in migrant bodies recovered, particularly in the Arizona desert, but throughout the US/Mexico borderlands. In a 2009 study, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) reported that between 1994 and 2009 more than 6,000 migrants died from dehydration, exposure to heat, motor vehicles or simply undetermined reasons as skeletal remains (Jimenez 2009).[5] Despite the decrease in undocumented migration, there was an increase in migrant deaths along the border in 2017 (Carranza 2018). Exposure to an inhospitable terrain is not the only obstacle faced by migrants.

Increasing militarization of the border has exacerbated the structural violence—poverty, nativism, racialization, misogyny and more—endemic to the region (cf. Segura and Zavella 2007), and interacted with the growing power of organized crime. In what has been categorized as a zone of low-intensity conflict (Dunn 1996, 2009; Falcón 2006), various actors from both states carry out gross human rights violations in the name of "border security", by Border Patrol agents, or profit, by coyotes who are paid guides who cross migrants north. As we describe, for women, sexual aggression, attack and rape are a common reality (Vogt 2013; Valencia 2017) in their journey through this conflict zone, and we take note of Morales and Bejarano' (2009) argument that while sexual and gendered violence is universal, it takes different forms in marginal local places, they state "While neoliberalism shapes certain individuals' exposure to sexual and gendered violence, it does not equally subject all local places to these forms of violence" (425).

Case studies: militarization at the US/Mexico border

As such, militarization of the US/Mexico border is another indicator of subjugation of place. Like no other region in the USA, it is a pseudo-war zone in which civilians on both sides have daily confrontations with armed federal agents from the National Guard, Border Patrol and Immigration and Customs Enforcement, now all compartmentalized under the Department of Homeland Security (Morales and Bejarano 2009, 426). Here we explain

the subjugation of place, and racialized and gendered bodies first through a coloniality of power framework and then through the border sexual context framework.

The coloniality of power is perhaps most apparent in the impunity for the many killings of Mexican and Central American nationals by US Border Patrol officers (SBCC 2017). For instance, in May 2018, a Border Patrol agent shot and killed 19-year-old Guatemalan national Claudia Patricia Gómez González in the Texas desert. Details of the killing are still unclear, with the agency quickly changing their account of the incident when a video from the scene was released. However, there should be little expectation that the agent will be held accountable because the Border Patrol and many xenophobic politicians have created a narrative that migrants crossing the border are dangerous, and thus even deadly actions by their agents are justified. For instance, the agency has recently been found to manipulate their data to show an increase in assaults on Border Patrol agents along the border (Nathan 2018). And in one case where a Border Patrol agent was found dead, media outlets and politicians blamed the death on undocumented migrants, and made the death a rallying cry for increased border security. However, the official investigation released four months later found that the agent most likely died from an accidental fall. The resulting exaggerated climate of fear in the borderlands seemingly played a part in the acquittal of an agent in the killing of a Mexican national who was on the Mexican side of the border wall (Steller 2018). Sixteen-year-old Jose Antonio Elena Rodriguez was shot on a sidewalk in Nogales, Sonora Mexico in 2012 by a US Border Patrol agent who fired through the border wall and later claimed self-defense from rocks that had been thrown from the Mexican side. In the ensuing criminal case against the agent, the jury found the Border Patrol officer not guilty of second-degree homicide even though the evidence showed that Jose Antonio was shot eight times in the back and twice in the head, and that most of the shots were delivered while the teenager was already face-down on the ground.

Border sexual conquest framework

Given the history of domination, war and conquest along the border, and the contemporary intersecting political, social and class identities shaped by the continued "coloniality of power" (Quijano 2000, 2007), the border region is an important site for what Morales and Bejarano (2009) call border sexual conquest. In particular, they use this concept as a way to describe the feminicides in Ciudad Juarez.

First, at the center of border sexual conquest are sexual and gendered aspects of violence. Rape, murder, attacks on feminine body parts and theories surrounding their deaths that characterize the victims as socially insignificant or even deserving of the violence, all sexualize the violence

that girls and women experience. Second, sexual exploitation as a colonizing tool surfaces today through the expansion of neoliberalism on both sides of the border, which directly contributes to assaults on women's bodies. In particular, neoliberalism has encouraged the collapse of the infrastructure that accompanied accelerated population growth and heightened global and local inequalities, both of which increase violence. Third, depiction of this border as a region in which "anything goes" makes it an ideal site for transnational corporations to experiment with globalization and not be accountable for the structural vulnerabilities that subject women to sexual violence (Morales and Bejarano 2009). Ultimately, as Falcón (2006) argues, "Acts of sexual violence which target undocumented (primarily Mexican) women at the US–Mexico border are certainly informed by a legacy of colonialism … migrant women's bodies continue to denote an 'alien' or 'threatening' presence subject to colonial domination by US officials" (120).

Countless examples of sexualized violence against migrant women by US officials can be marshaled. Here, we mention two recent reports. In their report. "A Culture of Cruelty" the Arizona-based non-governmental organization (NGO) No More Deaths (NMD) documents more than 30,000 allegations of abuse by US Border Patrol. These include, among many others, beatings, rough handling, withholding of food and water, and threats. A sizable number relate to violence against women. One woman reported that after being taken to a nearby processing center,

> … guards laughed at her for being Mexican. They had her strip naked; then they took her clothes and touched her breasts in the presence of both man and woman [*sic*] guards. Her belongings were taken and not returned, including $20, jewelry, and make-up. She was detained for two months in Florence. She was given papers in English to sign, without a translator, and was deported Sept. 18 to Nogales, Sonora. (NMD 2011)

Sexual violence by US officials continues when migrants are placed in long-term detention facilities, according to a 2018 report by *The Intercept*, an online publication. Based upon a freedom of information request, they reported that official records show over 30,000 formal complaints of physical and sexual violence filed by detainees between 2010 and 2017. The government released 1200 of these complaints and these examples underscore how insidious, prevalent and present border sexual conquest is. For instance,

> Another woman said officers cuffed and maced her following an argument with a fellow detainee at an immigration detention center in Florida. Then, as she lay on the ground, an officer sat on her "like a person would sit on a horse," his "erect penis on her butt." Officers then filmed her as she showered to wash off the mace.

These actions take place with little chance for recourse. Of the 1200 complaints released by the government, only 30 led to investigations. It is not known if any led to criminal charges or even reprimands.

We argue that border sexual conquest has now expanded as the large Mexican cartels that previously concentrated on the smuggling of drugs, weapons and money have insinuated themselves into the human smuggling business. As such, we use border sexual conquest as a framework to understand why sexual violence against female migrant border crossers has become a "fact of life" (Ruiz Marrujo 2009, 31; Simmons and Téllez 2014). As Sylvanna Falcón explains, sexual violence has been normalized such that "many women who cross the border report that being rape[d] was the 'price' of not being apprehended, deported, or of having their confiscated documents returned." A leading activist at the Arizona/Sonora border reported to us that when migrant women are asked whether they were sexually assaulted during their journey, the most common response is "the usual."

Data and methods

Our qualitative study on sexual violence against migrant women at the US/Mexico border relies on data collected[6] in spring 2009, when 50 interviews were completed in Southern and Central Arizona with social workers, humanitarian groups, local and federal law enforcement, consulate staff and victims' advocates who have significant direct contact with migrant women who were victims of sexual violence. Law enforcement included border patrol, officials with Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and local officials. Consul staff included consuls as well as those working more directly with migrants such as "protection officers." The interviews took place between three geographical regions: the vast Phoenix metropolitan area (approximately 120 miles from the border), the Tucson metropolitan area (approximately 60 miles from the border), and Nogales (a border town) and the surrounding areas in the Sonoran Desert. In all interviews but one—in which undercover agents were participants—we recorded the interviews using digital recorders and took copious notes. Several interviewees also provided us with official and unofficial reports from their organization and other data that we consulted in drafting this article. We want to acknowledge that we did not directly interview migrant women border crossers because we wanted to get a sense of the experience from the systems of support that exist and did not want to re-traumatize the women in the re-telling of their story and experiences.

The interviews were semi-structured with a general set of open-ended questions that centered on three areas: (1) interviewees' knowledge of prevalence and types of violence experienced by migrants, (2) prevention and victim support services, and (3) recommendations for addressing the issue. These interviews lasted between 30 minutes and 2 hours. When the participant was more comfortable in Spanish—approximately one-fourth of the time—we conducted the interview in that language. Recordings were

transcribed and translated into English if necessary, and then triangulated with our field notes.

Sexual violence in the Sonoran Desert

Violence against migrant women during their crossing into the United States and the impunity with which this violence occurs, we argue, form part of an ideology of border enforcement through attrition in the most perverse form. Women are subjected to attacks across varying points in their journeys and from multiple perpetrators. According to Harel Shapira (2013), in his book about the extrajudicial border patrol organization known as the Minutemen, rape trees are present on many ranches in Southern Arizona. The level of aggression is palpable. Yet there is neither recourse nor support for the migrant woman who has been deemed rapable, disposable and unworthy of recognition along the borderlands. Furthermore, because of the increased enforcement and obstacles migrants face in crossing, criminal enterprises that once focused almost solely on drug smuggling have moved into the human smuggling industry, thus driving out what were once known as "mom and pop" migrant-friendly smugglers. Migrants have become the commodities conditioned by the smuggling market and in a capital-driven system, the most vulnerable are women (Lugo 2008). Weissman (2004) argues,

> Violence is perpetrated against women whose place in the hierarchy of market values renders them readily interchangeable cogs in the wheel of production. They are vulnerable precisely because they are easily expendable; they are deprived of human rights because they are denied their humanity.

As a direct consequence, sexual assault against women has steadily increased over the last 15 years but the magnitude of the violence cannot be formally captured because the human smuggling market coupled with the systems of enforcement silence women from reporting this violence. One of our interviewees shared:

> It is definitely bigger than anything recorded or reported, it is bigger in reality. When we train the volunteers during the summers, our way of thinking is that if we encounter women in the desert and that she is not with a husband or other relative we consider 100% that she is a victim of sexual assault. This is because the women have told us that they have been assaulted if they are not traveling with a family member. There is evidence and we see it … the one that stands out, in April, it was a story that came from a guy that lives in Arivaca so it was a search for a woman's body. He lives in an area that people come to for help. A woman came to his door asking for food, clothes and help. The woman was in a group and she was one of two women (her and her friend). She said her friend was left behind, the coyote took her friend and dragged her out in the desert and repeatedly raped her. She heard the screams then heard nothing. Then the coyote came back and raped her. They then kept walking and she had an opportunity to leave (her friend was still in the desert). She got to the ranch

> and asked for help and told the story. They went out to look for the woman, but they could never find her. The woman wanted to keep going … she didn't want to go to the police … she's in the US somewhere … she didn't even receive medical attention. (Volunteer, NGO)

Ruiz Marrujo's (2009) research also shows that coyotes have almost exclusive control over the people who have paid them and often gain total and complete access to the bodies of migrant women. She writes:

> Coyotes may refuse to take a woman with him, threaten to turn her over to unknown men or abandon her midway if she refuses his advances. Aware of the possibility of such a demand and seeking to avoid a confrontation and possibly greater risk, a woman may "agree" from the beginning of her negotiations with a coyote to have sex with him in exchange for his "help" or "protection." (35)

One interviewee told us that the migrants she has encountered have said that,

> The coyotes are raping the women at night or in the evening. Usually they will be drinking. I heard stories of the coyote forcing the other migrants to rape the women, and the coyote watches. The women are also raped at gun point.

Although violence against women exists at the intersections of many social, economic and political conditions, we argue that the increase in violence against migrant women is directly linked to the policies of enforcement that we have outlined. In other words, sexual violence against women does not only occur *near* the US/Mexico border, it occurs precisely because of the *existence* of this border.

According to our sources, violence against women also occurs when bajadores (bandits) attack a group of migrants traveling through the desert. Sometimes the group is taken as a whole, other times the bandits rob the migrants and then sexually assault the women and girls. In such a situation, being with family members is of little help:

> Whether you have two or ten relatives there is nothing you can do to overcome the bandits with weapons. The bandits are always armed, and their attacks tend to be much more violent. They will often wear ski masks and carry automatic weapons. (Interview with law enforcement official)

There is no system in place to support women who have lived through what can only be described as a horrifying experience that has been codified into practice by circumstance. In fact, this gross human rights violation is not even on the radar for US officials. As one Phoenix police offer said to us,

> I have never had anyone recognize someone in the desert. The women are exhausted, tired, disoriented and they don't know where they are. There is no frame of reference. Also, there is little incentive for officials to pursue these crimes as their mandated priorities are with large-scale traffickers of drugs,

> money and guns; those at the top of the criminal syndicate hierarchy. "Common" migrants who are apprehended are to be processed as quickly as possible, and removed from the country.

These depictions led us to the conclusion that accountability does not exist from the state or legal systems.

Impunity at the US/Mexico border

The system of border enforcement through attrition criminalizes the crosser rather than the structural conditions in which they find themselves. This dehumanizing process is evident in the following description from a Phoenix-based attorney who works to obtain visas for migrant women who have suffered violence:

> I have a client that was taken from Guatemala to a drop house in Mexico where she was repeatedly raped by her guide and got pregnant with his child, the guide then abandoned her when he found out she was pregnant. She found somebody else to take her to the US. So from there she was taken to several drop houses in Mexico. It's a trafficking case, but we can't prove it. She was taken to several drop houses and then wasn't charged any money. And she and a couple of girls she was with were all brought the same day, were all raped both in Mexico and the US, and in the desert, they were caught crossing the border. They were caught, the people, the guides were not caught. (Phoenix attorney)

We also noted limited communication between various legal/enforcement/justice agencies. One unit, according to policy, may not help victims of assault or other victims of crime because it is not in their capacity to do so. These rigid definitions of responsibility leave gaping holes in providing assistance and/or recognizing the victim's human rights, allowing agents to wipe their hands clean from these rampant human rights abuses:

> What Border Patrol does is call in the Sheriffs or the PD [police department], we don't investigate those crimes we are just border enforcers. A lot of time they won't tell us, we make an apprehension and go through the whole process and then we send them back and they tell the Mexican Consulate. There is nothing we can do except call the PD or the Sheriffs. We don't screen for this because it is not in the policy. We have signs in the detention center to tell us if you are hungry, thirsty or the victim of crime. (Border Patrol agent)

To note, these signs are in English and most likely inaccessible to most migrants. As another volunteer pointed out to us, "I know that the agents are not telling people, they are not asking the migrants if they are a victim of a crime, and they are not trying to identify victims … ." Moreover, many "migrants assume because they came in an illegal way, they assume they don't have any rights, so they don't reach out for any services." In cases in

which a victim wants to press charges and/or tell her story to the authorities they are often in a rush to get them removed from the country and their voices are ignored. A social worker from the Tucson area described this common scenario to us:

> According to the information provided by Ms Newman, Maria wanted to press charges. However, she had little to no information about the person who had assaulted her. Also on the scene was a Border Patrol agent, however, he did not have any information about what was going on. When I arrived, Maria had already been there for a significant amount of time and was about to be transferred upstairs.[7]

Another volunteer, from a humanitarian aid NGO agreed, "Women are raped and then at the hospital they are getting ready to deport her so she is not getting the services that she needs."

We are acutely aware that in the contemporary climate in the USA, following the 2016 election of Donald Trump, attempts to draw attention to the issue of sexual violence against migrant women are likely to be picked up by anti-immigrant forces all the way to the US President who are quick to label immigrants as the perpetrators of violence rather than the neoliberal policies in place that facilitate this violence. For example, in response to news of a migrant caravan of Central Americans making its way to the United States through Mexico, President Trump claimed, without any evidence whatsoever, that in the caravan "women are raped at levels that nobody has ever seen before." When, in fact, the caravan was created by the migrants themselves to protect them from abuses such as sexual assault, and there have been no reported rapes in this particular caravan (Lind, April 6, 2018).

Similarly, the rape trees that we started our article with, have been mobilized by right-wing, anti-immigrant groups (Shapira 2013).

> For the Minutemen, the rape trees are a powerful symbol of the Mexican male's immorality and simultaneously imbue their own actions with valor; by patrolling the border, the volunteers are defending not just America but women, and not just American women but all women, even the ones who are "illegal." (117)

For us then, the dilemma is to present the realities of women's lives at the US/Mexican border knowing that these narratives can feed a xenophobic and patriarchal narrative. By placing these narratives in the context of the coloniality of power and a history of border sexual context, we hope to show that such rhetoric will fuel securitization policies that will increase the attacks on women's bodies in the borderlands. As Castañeda (2007) writes, recounting such narratives, "re-members and recodes the borderlands, bearing witness to the living past, the present, and the future, belying officialdom's technologies of power to silence, deny, and obliterate" (x).

Complicating the issue of low reportage and impunity is the abuse of power by many US Border Patrol agents, who have also been known to rape women migrants. Many of the service providers made reference to this reality, and there have been several highly publicized cases of US Border Patrol agents sexually assaulting girls and women along the border (see Falcón 2007 for an in-depth discussion of cases from the late 1980s and early 1990s, and also Rojas 2007). This system then appears to enforce border control through attrition, a perverse form of enforcement that discounts the cost in human lives and ignore the long-standing effects on those who do survive.

Conclusion

In this article, we traced a colonial history of subjugation of place and identified that the border is perceived as a zone of conflict in which violence against women is met with impunity. We also outlined policies and operations along the border that enforce attrition at the expense of women's lives and, finally, we analyzed how migrant women are deemed disposable and expendable in a global market system defined by neoliberalism. Although we did not center on the work of women-led activism, we want to acknowledge that women are not passive victims of their conditions (Téllez 2008; Fregoso and Bejarano 2010; Téllez, Sanidad, and de la Fuente 2011; Simmons and Mueller 2014; Staudt and Mendez 2015; Staudt and Coronado 2002). However, since the original study was conducted in 2009, the cartels have become even more entrenched in the human smuggling trade. The rape trees are singularly overt markers of violence against women when most of the violence goes unrecognized and unseen except for the experiences of the women. These are the underlying dynamics, a veritable web of oppression that leads to a high prevalence of sexual violence against migrant women, including the ghastly rape trees, at the US/Mexico border. Rosa Linda Fregoso (2003) has argued,

> Highlighting the role of the patriarchal state in creating the conditions of possibility for the proliferation of gender violence … to think about it in broader terms, not just as isolated or personal in nature, but as a form of state-sanctioned terrorism, a tool of political repression sanctioned by an undemocratic patriarchal state in its crusade against poor and racialized citizens. (132–133)

Here, we must underscore that both the USA and Mexico are complicit in perpetuating the violence against women, both in the state's denial and silence. Only by understanding these structural and policy factors will we begin to see recognition and support for the victims. We hope this piece draws attention to the continued coloniality of power along the border and future work should look at redressal mechanisms.

Notes

1. Humanitarian aid organization based out of Tucson and Phoenix that provides first aid and water to migrants crossing the treacherous Sonoran Desert.
2. Senate Bill 1070; Section 1 State of Arizona Senate Forty-ninth Legislature Second Regular Session 2010.
3. We want to acknowledge the reviewers of the journal for helping us make this connection.
4. Please see: https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/mexicos-southern-border-strategy-programa-frontera-sur and https://photos.state.gov/libraries/mexico/310329/july2014/Merida-Initiative-Overview-jul14.pdf for more information.
5. ACLU citation.
6. The research team consisted of Dr Robin Haar (Eastern Kentucky University), Dr William P. Simmons and Dr Michelle Téllez (both of Arizona State University at the time of original study) and several graduate research assistants.
7. Incident Report: 090122163.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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