Borders, Labor and Trauma: The Multidimensional Struggle of Family Separation on Male Migrant Workers

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Abstract

This paper examines the social and emotional impact of family separation on migrant workers who have been displaced and forced to migrate to the United States. I use *testimonio* methodology to learn about the multidimensional struggles of migrant workers as a result of family separation and the connection to their immigration status. The *testimonios* collectively reveal the hardships that migrant workers endure and demonstrate the mental and emotional hardships of family separation on their well-being. They often find themselves enduring poverty, exploitation, discrimination, mental and physical health problems, danger, addiction, and fear of deportation while also being separated from their families. Critical Race Theory and Undocumented Critical Theory inform this project.

Introduction

This paper examines the social and emotional impact of family separation on migrant workers who have been displaced and forced to migrate where a high demand for cheap labor exists. A growing body of research on family separation

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and its impact on youth from Mexico and Central America has offered a more complete understanding of the experiences of migrant youth in and outside of the United States. Abrego (2014, 2020) and Gonzales (2011, 2013, 2017) have drawn the link between family separation and the mental and emotional health and well-being of undocumented, DACAmented[2] and the 1.5 generation.[3] Ojeda et al. (2020) examined the mental health and social and economic consequences of family separation resulting from the deportation of male migrants, while their family members remained in the US. Similarly, this paper seeks to advance the discussion on the impact of family separation for immigrants who reside in the US, but whose families/communities remain in their countries of origin. *Testimonio* interviews with migrant workers who seek employment in informal hiring sites as day laborers, and critical race and ethnographic methodologies were employed to conduct the study. These methodologies explore family separation and describe how separation takes place to identify trauma and to learn about the ways migrant workers manage the struggles and consequences of family separation and cope with social and emotional trauma. Additionally, Critical Race and Latino Critical Theory and Undocumented Critical Theory inform this study.

The growth of family separation for immigrants and the increase of migrant worker rights violations are national trends that deserve attention from the public, policy-makers, community activists, and scholars. Migrant labor work and family separation are complex issues that generate conflict and anti-immigrant sentiment against "undocumented" migrant workers that often results in trauma and mental health instability. This study aims to generate data on the impact of family separation on migrant workers residing in the US to advance and foster a public and scholarly discussion on this issue. For this reason, it is important to identify the foreign and domestic policies that displace migrant workers across Mexico and Central America and make their way to the US seeking employment. It is also important to understand immigration patterns to the US and how US foreign policies, military intervention, and free trade agreements between the US and Mexico and Central America are the beginning to social and emotional trauma and struggles that displaced migrant workers experience.

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[2] DACAmented refers to the youth who are eligible and received the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program which offers temporary protection from deportation and lawful permission to work and attend school.

[3] Immigrants from the 1.5 generation relocated to the United States as children and came of age in this country. Their parents are the first generation to migrate to the US and their siblings (second generation) were born in the US.

Robinson (2008) argues that as borders have come down through trade agreements for capital and goods, they have been reinforced for displaced migrant workers. In this way, US foreign policies foster global inequality, while domestic policies foster domestic inequality and the demand for secondary labor market workers. While capitalism and neoliberalism in the US create the need for migrant workers, these workers do not enjoy citizenship rights in their host countries. Furthermore, Chomsky (2009) suggests that the increase of global inequalities in the US has created a high-profit/cheap-labor product model by increasing immigration. Wealthy countries have experienced an influx of transnational immigration over the past few decades as developing countries and regions have been integrated, often violently, into global capitalism through military interventions, invasions and occupations, free-trade agreements, neoliberal social and economic policies, and financial crises (Mora & Davila, 2009). Millions of people have been displaced from their home countries, particularly in what is considered the global south, and have been forced to migrate with the upsurge of global capitalism and free trade agreements across the world. As a result, a new pool of exploitable laborers has been created for the global economy as national labor markets have increasingly merged into a global labor market (Robinson, 2008). Migrant labor patterns in the US have generated workers who are often drawn from ethnically and racially minoritized groups. Many of these workers are migrants from Mexico and Central America who migrate to the US, often leaving families and communities behind (Valenzuela, 2002).

Global capitalism reorganizes the supply of labor to the global economy (Robinson, 2008). In this way, trade and immigration policies are part of a system that reproduces displaced, exploitable workers (Bacon, 2008). Trade agreements among nations, such as the Unites States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA), formerly the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), have far reaching domestic and international consequences (Mora & Davila, 2009). A close relationship exists between US trade and immigration policies since NAFTA, which was implemented in 1994, allowing the movement of goods and capital but not the movement of people (Robinson, 2008). NAFTA did not lead to greater freedom of movement for workers and farmers across the US-Mexico Border, as it is now also stipulated in the USMCA, and did not give immigrant workers and farmers greater rights and equality in the US (Bacon, 2008). Chomsky (2009) suggests that a new model of global economic integration is necessary to redistribute resources more equitably, that also embraces traditional lifestyles of displaced peoples.

Immigration policies and immigration statuses establish a hierarchy of well-being for immigrants and their families. In this way, the exploitation of migrant

workers would not be possible if migrant workers had the same rights as citizen workers (Castrejon, 2017). Granting full citizenship rights to millions of undocumented immigrants would undermine the dichotomy of the working class-immigrants and citizens. This dichotomy is an important component of workers who can be hired and fired at will, face unsafe work conditions, job instability, a lack of benefits, and low wages (Robinson, 2008). Undocumented immigrant workers are vulnerable to deportation, constricted to low wages, and denied basic human rights, including limited access to housing, education, and healthcare. Leaving them outside of the realm of legal order fosters perverse actions against them and relieves authorities from obligations to protect them (Martinez & Valenzuela, 2006).

Moreover, Menjivar (2006) argues that the immigration status of migrants shapes who they are, how they relate to others, their participation in local communities, and their continued relationship with their homelands. She also highlights that it is often unfeasible economically and otherwise for immigrants to return to their countries of origin, many of these countries, particularly El Salvador and Guatemala, are either at war or suffering the devastation of war. This study reveals that migrant workers who are displaced as a result of US foreign and domestic policies and forced to migrate by themselves, often leaving behind spouses and children in their countries of origin, experience social and emotional trauma, especially from the family separation that they experience.

Family Separation

The vast array of research on the well-being of immigrants reveal that they experience high levels of stress due to the barriers of being out of immigration status (Abrego, 2011). Additionally, immigration policies and legal statuses establish a hierarchy of well-being for migrant workers and their families. The exploitation of migrant workers is sustained through the fear of deportation, which also makes immigrants, especially undocumented immigrants, "controllable" because the fear of deportation assures the ability to exploit migrant workers with impunity and dispose them without consequence if these workers become "uncontrollable" or "unnecessary" (Bacon, 2008). Robinson (2008) argues that the denial of migrant workers' rights and absolving the state and employers of any commitment to the protection of these workers allows for maximum exploitation. Consequently, migrant workers become responsible for their own maintenance and reproduction, and for their families still in their country of origin. Abrego (2014) found that while adults experience undocumented life through fear, for young people who grow up in the US and are socialized in a school environment the primary experience is that of shame and stigma. Similarly, the lack of consistent

work and income sustained through fear of deportation often results in shame, especially for migrant workers who work in informal settings, due to the inability to remit consistently (Castrejon, 2017). Gonzales et al. (2013) examined the relationship between undocumented immigrant status and mental and emotional health. They argue that due to the hardships associated with parental immigration status and poverty, undocumented immigrants move into low-income, segregated areas leading to lives with little financial security. Their research also demonstrates that the children of immigrants who are out of immigration status are much more likely to be low-income, experience poor housing, and receive poor health care.

Citizenship as an immigration status dictates whom the state recognizes as a citizen and the formal basis for the rights and responsibilities of the individual (Menjivar, 2006). Therefore, citizenship and the lack of it, contribute to the lack of participation of immigrants as full members of US society. Additionally, the hostile social and political climate, anxiety and fear of deportation, stigma, and decreased options for immigrants to participate as full members of society can take a toll on youths' mental and emotional health. The long-term uncertainty of immigration status often goes on for years and permeates many aspects of the lives of immigrants, from job market opportunities and housing, to family and kinship (Menjivar, 2006). Thus, the social implications of the fear of family separation as a result of deportation on both children and adults have serious consequences on the family. Also, immigration status matters because it dictates both the economic and emotional stability of all members of transnational families (Abrego, 2014).[4]

I draw on the work of Leisy Abrego (2014) to explain that migration is often the most plausible solution for families in dire situations that result from US military and economic intervention. In her work with members of transnational families in El Salvador, Abrego (2014) argues that transnational families are a manifestation of economic circumstances, in which parents migrate in search of more sustainable wages to send as remittances to their children and other family members. Migrant workers send sums of money that add up to relative sustainability for their families, and for their countries as a whole. Collectively, remittances have become a survival strategy for families and also a mainstay of the national economies of several developing countries. Moreover, she suggests that transnational families seek migration and family separation as survival strategies that take advantage of global inequalities. In this way, parents often practice parenting from afar through remittances.

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[4] Transnational families are families that navigate life across nations.

Family separation then becomes an economic strategy of long-term separation that results in profound and undeniable emotional effects on parents and children. Abrego asks a very important question, "What are the affective tolls on various members of these families?" (p. 6). The emotional consequences of a parent's absence on children are profound. It is equally important to understand the impact of family separation in order to move forward with more comprehensive advocacy to alleviate some of the trauma caused as a result of separation. Abrego's (2014) work with mixed-status[5] families from El Salvador also reveals that, for adults, the primary experience of undocumented life is manifested in fear, particularly fear of deportation and family separation.

In her work with Mexican transnational families, Fuller-Iglesias (2015) examined the perceptions of transnational kinship among family members who remain in their country of origin (Mexico) as well as those who return (often through deportation) and the impact of family separation on the family relationship. According to Fuller-Iglesias (2015) family fragmentation was reported more often than an increase in family unity, which is not surprising because most families remained separated. Family members often revealed the strain related to the transnational separation while the migrant family member was still absent; however, returning migrants also revealed that upon reuniting they experienced increased family unity. Fuller-Iglesias (2015) argues that it is possible that returning migrants perceive increased unity due to a need to feel their sacrifices were worthwhile. Often, their decision to return is likely based on the premise of family reunification and unity. Additionally, at times the returning migrants mentioned that some migrants remained in the US because they no longer felt that they had reason to return to Mexico. It is important to note that this distinction between returning migrants and those who remain in the US may be reflective of gender differences, as family unity was more commonly reported among return migrants, who were all men and fathers; whereas the struggles of family fragmentation were more often reported by women, who were mostly wives and mothers. In this way, women may also experience the struggles of family separation and geographic distance due to their gender-prescribed caregiving role.

Fuller-Iglesias (2015) also demonstrates drastic differences in the ways transnational and mixed status families react to family separation. Some families become closer because of migration, while other families have been fragmented by

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[5] Mixed status families are families in which one or more family members are US citizens or lawful permanent residents and some are undocumented without immigration status. Approximately 16.2 million people (6.1 million US citizen children) in the US live in a mixed status family (National Immigration Forum).

migration. Furthermore, for some families, family separation had the potential to magnify familial problems. In other cases, family separation had the potential to improve the familial relationship, creating more family unity. In parent-child relationships, perceptions of family life differed with children believing family unity could be sustained despite separation and parents reporting increasing concerns of family fragmentation. Moreover, the length of separation affects the perceptions of family unity; families that experience longer separations demonstrate concerns about lack of family cohesion. This was especially true when migrants missed out on major family and community events (Fuller-Iglesias, 2015). To bridge the chasm that exists in the literature on the experience of family separation for migrant workers whose families remain their countries of origin, it is important to learn about these migrant workers.

Critical Race and Undocumented Critical Theory

In this paper I use Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Undocumented Critical Theory (UndocuCrit) to expose the bias and discrimination that migrant workers experience due to their racialized socioeconomic standing and immigration status. I also use Chicana feminist thought to inform the *testimonios* (counterstories of survival and resistance) from the migrant workers who participated in this study.

CRT and UndocuCrit focus on the centrality of experiential knowledge to recognize the value of the lived experiences of marginalized communities, giving them a voice and acknowledging the consequences of racism (Aguilar, 2019; Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001; Solorzano & Yosso, 2001). CRT recognizes experiential knowledge as legitimate, appropriate, and critical to understand racial subordination (Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001). Furthermore, Solorzano and Delgado Bernal (2001) argue that it is crucial to the lived experiences of students of color to frame this knowledge as a strength. In this paper, this knowledge informs the analysis of the testimonios of struggle due to family separation and the perils of labor-intensive work. I use CRT and UndocuCrit to advance an interdisciplinary perspective that challenges ahistoricism and the unidisciplinary focus of most analysis of race and migration.

UndocuCrit develops from a lineage of CRT and serves as a first attempt to understand the nuanced experiences of undocumented life (Aguilar, 2019; Gonzales, 2016). In this way, UndocuCrit acknowledges the multiple historical struggles of undocumented communities in the US. Although LatCrit and TribalCrit are rooted in similar contexts, UndocuCrit brings attention to differing local, state, and federal sociopolitical contexts, experiential knowledge, and intersectionalities

of undocumented immigrants (Aguilar 2019). Similar to LatCrit, UndocuCrit acknowledges the sociopolitics of immigration, language, identity, culture, and skin color, but its conceptualization expands beyond the Latinx experience. The rendering of this theoretical frame provides a lens to understand the lived experiences of struggle of *all* (undocumented) immigrant communities in the US.

Aguilar (2019) provides this theoretical conceptualization of the lived experience of undocumented immigrants to better understand and appreciate undocumented communities. UndocuCrit acknowledges these struggles faced by migrant communities in educational institutions. But this analysis can be undertaken to explain the lived experiences of struggle of *other* undocumented immigrants. In the case of this study, UndocuCrit helps us uncover the struggles of migrant workers in the US whose families remain in their countries of origin. Aguilar's (2019) emerging theoretical framework also acknowledges the resilience of undocumented communities by exposing the fear and oppression of living undocumented, the nuances of these lived experiences, and the ways undocumented immigrants thrive despite the social and political barriers and the anti-immigrant sentiment in this country. Aguilar offers the following tenets of UndocuCrit theory to better understand undocumented communities (p. 153):

1. *Fear is endemic among immigrant communities.*
2. *Different experiences of liminality translate into different experiences of reality.*
3. *Parental sacrificios become a form of capital.*
4. *Acompañamiento is the embodiment of mentorship, academic redemption, and community engagement.*

Fear is Endemic Among Immigrant Communities

Aguilar (2019) first tenet has particular repercussions for migrant workers who experience family separation. Fear and anxiety, and their negative effects among folks with undocumented and liminal status, have been observed to affect even those distant members of a community as transmitted by threats of deportation and anti-immigrant rhetoric. Consistent with CRT and LatCrit, UndocuCrit maintains that racism in the US can be better understood through the unfavorable consequences that inhumane and violent immigration policies and practices have had on all racialized migrants.

Different Experiences of Liminality Translate Into Different Experiences of Reality

UndocuCrit is committed to learning and sharing the stories of resilience and success of immigrants in the US despite social, cultural, economic, and political barriers. Aguilar (2019) suggests that we highlight these experiences of undocumented immigrants and documented family members who defy the

citizenist binary (citizen and non-citizen) through different and nuanced lived experiences. UndocuCrit focuses on individual, familial, and communal experiences to recognize and honor sociopolitical categories like identity, age, gender, country of origin, sexuality, skin color, and others.

Parental Sacrificios Become a Form of Capital

Sacrificios are capital that undocumented parents pass on to their children. Sacrificios can be experienced in the moment or retrospectively. Regardless, the cognitive capital and frame of reference that undocumented parents pass on to their children is identified, recognized, and utilized to achieve academically. In the case of migrant workers in this case, sacrificios are experienced similarly as parents, spouses, partners, and sons (Aguilar, 2019).

Acompañamiento is the Embodiment of Mentorship, Academic Redemption, and Community Engagement

Aguilar (2019) notes that to be *acompañadxs* means to share and create knowledge that is accessible and relatable for undocumented communities. He also suggest that a conscious effort to facilitate these renderings to our communities should be of great concern, thus, UndocuCrit encourages the use of narratives, *testimonios*, counterstories, story-telling, family histories, biographies, scenarios, parables, *cuentos*, chronicles, oral histories, corridos, *chisme*, and comedy (Aguilar, 2019).

CRT and UndocuCrit theory deconstruct race/ethnicity, racism, and xenophobia in a historical and contemporary context using interdisciplinary methodologies: critical race, *testimonio*, and ethnographic methods (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001, Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2003), which were used in this study. UndocuCrit centers the experiences of undocumented immigrants, their knowledge, and a more complex understanding of the varied and at times contradicting realities of migrant communities.

Testimonio **Methodologies**

Testimonio methodology is often used to address educational inequities in Chicana/o/Latina/o communities (Acevedo, 2001; Russell y Rodriguez, 2007; Delgado Bernal et al., 2012). Here I use *testimonios* to learn about the impact of family separation on migrant workers. Critical race and *testimonio* methodologies seek a more profound understanding of the racialized, socioeconomic, and politicized immigration processes and the structural barriers of family separation and their impacts on migrant workers. These critical methods challenge traditional methodologies and seek the development of theories of social transformation to

deconstruct systems of power: patriarchy, racism, xenophobia, citizenism,[6] poverty, discrimination, exploitation, trauma, and other systems of oppression (Delgado Bernal, 1998; Latina Feminist Group, 2001; Revilla, 2004; Solorzano & Yosso, 2001). These methods are the appropriate scientific research approaches because they challenge the legacy of colonialism and the xenophobia that remains, and continue to inform the academy and dictate the experiences of the world's displaced people of color, namely the struggles of family separation (Tuhiwai Smith, 2012).

Testimonio methodologies are rooted in oral culture and human rights struggles, exposing systems of power that persecute poor people of color in Latin America and disrupting the silencing of these communities to build solidarity (Delgado Bernal et al., 2012). *Testimonio* methodology is a tool for the researcher to bring to the forefront the community's experiences of struggle (Delgado Bernal, 1998; Delgado Bernal et al., 2012). *Testimonio* methodology also challenges objectivity and situates the individual in communion with a collective experience marked by marginalization, oppression, exploitation, survival, and resistance (Ibid., p. 555).

Fieldwork

All of the *testimonio* interviews were conducted with day laborers[7] at the Torino corner, an informal hiring site in Las Vegas, Nevada, during the duration of my fieldwork for my doctoral thesis. I use *testimonios* to learn about the struggles of family separation of migrant workers and analyze the data to ensure an accurate account of these experiences. The fieldwork took place from 2013 to 2017 in Las Vegas, Nevada. The project required close, long-term contact with migrant workers who seek work at an informal hiring site as day laborers. The workers gather at an informal hiring site that has been in operation for more than 10 years with little attrition. The majority of day laborers arrive between 6:30 am and 10:00 am to wait for work and stay as late as 5:00 pm. The workers visit the corner every day of the week. The *testimonio* interviews were conducted regularly throughout the duration of the fieldwork. Extensive notes were collected of the *testimonio* interviews I conducted. I communicated with the workers mostly in Spanish and I also shared my testimonio with many of the workers the same way they did. A total of 22 *testimonio* interviews were conducted. The interviews were conducted in Spanish and later translated to English. Most of the workers were born in Mexico and Central America (87%), and three out of four day laborers are undocumented immigrants. I had a strategic advantage because there was no language barrier, and share some of the values, culture, and phenotype with the workers.

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[6] Citizenism is a term used to describe discrimination based on citizenship status.
[7] Day labor is the practice of searching for work in open-air and informal markets.

Findings

All of the workers who shared their *testimonio* migrated from Mexico or CentralAmerica and experience or have experienced family separation. My time at the hiring site focused on the day-to-day interactions amongst them. The workers confirmed that the majority of them are out of immigration status. Most of the workers, during their *testimonio* interviews and during informal conversations, revealed in some way (without me asking) that they did not have "papers." They understand that employer abuse and labor violations, which have serious consequences ranging from financial hardship to unreasonable work expectations to serious injury and emotional distress, are a direct result of being undocumented. Intimidation and threats by employers, and sometimes the public, of calling the police or immigration authorities are common occurrences. These forms of threats often take an emotional toll on the workers. Moreover, the workers also experience wage theft but are hesitant about alerting authorities because of fear of the police. The police have harassed the few workers who did call to report harassment. According to the day laborers, the police have done very little in helping the few workers who have reported any form of discrimination. In this way, employers and the police alike are engaged in the mistreatment and discrimination of the workers.

According to the workers, outside of day labor work, but directly connected to their immigration status, the most difficult aspect of being a migrant worker is family separation. The majority of the workers migrated to the US leaving their families behind. Many of them have children that they have not met or families they haven't visited in the years since they arrived to the US. Despite the many years that most of the workers have lived in the US, most of them plan to bring their families once their financial situation stabilizes or return to their countries of origin once they have "enough" money saved up. The majority of the workers revealed that most of their earnings are remitted to their families. But their plans to reunite are never fulfilled because they don't earn enough income to remit to their families, sustain themselves, and save to bring their families to the US or return with savings.

As their plans to reunite with their families don't come to fruition, some of the workers expressed feelings of shame and guilt. They often feel that if they return home without little to show for their hard work during their time in the US they will become a burden to their families. Others prefer not to return home because they consider the low prospects of finding work that would allow them to earn what they earn as day laborers, even when they earn very little. After working in the US for many years, some of the workers expressed that having little upward mobility and

few opportunities to prosper is dehumanizing. The hardships associated with family separation are directly connected to their immigration status and their socioeconomic standing, as they are unable to afford to visit their families and reenter the US (the workers report that currently the cost to cross the US-Mexico border with the help of a *coyote* (smuggler) is $10,000 and smuggling is controlled by Mexican drug cartels).

Borders, Labor, and Trauma

The *testimonios* collectively reveal the hardships that migrant workers endure from the time they make the decision to leave their home countries to migrate to the US to the time they return home. In addition, their counterstories challenge the dominant narratives and deficit language used against migrants generally, and migrant workers more specifically, that misrepresent them in anti-immigrant tropes while revealing that migrant workers, despite the struggles of being out of immigration status and separated from their families, contribute economically, socially, and culturally to the prosperity of the communities they enter. In addition, the *testimonios* demonstrate the mental and emotional hardships of family separation on the well-being of migrant workers.

Marcelo

Marcelo came to the U.S. in the early 1990s alone with plans to reunite with his family once established here, but more importantly once he saved the funds necessary to pay the coyotes to cross his family. However, those plans did not come to fruition. He shared on several occasions that his now adult children wanted him to return to his hometown in Morelos, Mexico because of his age; he was one of the elders at this site and spent about 8 years there as a worker. Marcelo also worked in other informal labor markets as a security guard at concerts, taking care of animals, and in pool maintenance. While Marcelo found work permanency as a day laborer, he suffered from alcoholism and was seriously injured numerous times as a result of being intoxicated at work sites. Marcelo often would reveal that he drank when he felt lonely and far away from his family.

    His longevity at the hiring site made him many friends who looked after him. At the same time, he experienced exploitation and discrimination as a direct result of his immigration status. He was driven to the desert on one occasion by an employer to be abandoned without pay, but he got scared and jumped out of the vehicle. The employer did not return to check on him. Fortunately, he wasn't seriously injured and walked to a bus stop to return home. Marcelo was also detained by the police numerous times and was given citations for jaywalking and

for public urination, and he was arrested multiple times for public intoxication. For him, drinking to deal with the emotional and mental hardships of being away from his family resulted in entering the criminal justice.

It was apparent that being away from his family weighed heavily on Marcelo, emotionally and physically. His deteriorating health and age were determining factors in his return to his family in Mexico. He was hesitant to return because, in the many years that he was in the US, he was unable to save money and it was his intention to come back with savings to support his family and start a better living for them. Nonetheless, all of us were happy to learn that he returned to his family in Mexico. Most of the workers came to the US with the same intentions. However, their efforts to work and save money do not materialize because of the volatility of day labor work. The majority of the workers, including Marcelo, revealed that they felt shame to return to their countries of origin without savings and they would not be able to meet the expectations that were set for them. Marcelo and others also revealed that their families did not want them to work as day laborers because they didn't trust the work, the employers, and the other day laborers. Many of the workers did not share with their families about their life as day laborers, which was also burdensome for them.

Jose

I also share the *testimonio* from Jose because of his longevity as a day laborer and his time at this site. He had been in Las Vegas for six years doing this type of work and also spent six years in California working as a day laborer. Jose had been in the US and separated from his family in Puebla, Mexico for more than twelve years, yet he doesn't have immediate or long-term plans for his family to migrate to the US or for him to return to Puebla. His children are attending school in Mexico and he prefers that they stay in school. He also shared that he wouldn't like his children to experience the hardships of being an immigrant in the US and the dangers of crossing the desert like he did twelve years ago.

> *Since I left Puebla I miss my kids every day, but I think it's better for them to stay there aunque me rompa el corazon (even if it breaks my heart). I know it's not easy for them either but I want them to finish school, I don't want them to go through what I had to go through. I don't want them to worry about any of the same things I worry about. It's better that I struggle not them.*[8]

Although Jose doesn't seem to be physically challenged by the hardships and the conditions of day labor work, he explicitly elaborated that he doesn't accept jobs that are dangerous because if he gets hurt and is unable to work his family would

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[8] Excerpts of the *testimonios* have been translated from Spanish to English by the author.

be directly impacted financially, another indication that the emotional and mental struggles are multidimensional. For example, although Jose has never been seriously injured doing day labor work, he knows other workers who have been seriously injured at job sites and were forced to stop working. As a result, their families stopped receiving financial support. Most of his concerns revolve around having to stop working and losing wages that are essential to his livelihood here and his family in Mexico.

> The sacrificio that we're all making is hard but it's what we have to do. I know that the distance is really hard for my family. But we don't have another option. It's really hard for me too. Sometimes I feel sad. But as long as I can continue working, I'm going to do it so that we can have what to eat, a roof, and my kids can dedicate their time to their schooling.

Jose often talked about feeling sad of being separated from his family. But he understood his role in his family of a provider despite the emotional and mental hardships of being so far from his family in Puebla. Adhering to gender norms for many of the workers resulted in trauma and other mental health concerns. For many of the workers, the way to cope with trauma and mental health was by drinking or using other substances. Unlike Jose, some of the workers visited this particular hiring site to drink and hangout, especially the workers who were houseless.

Jon

I met Jon when I started my fieldwork. He had been doing day labor work for more than 8 years and had been visiting this hiring site for more than four years. Jon is from El Salvador and had been in the US for fifteen years. He has serious health issues because of alcoholism and has been hospitalized numerous times and has been advised to stop drinking or his condition will worsen. However, Jon disclosed to me that he is depressed and drinking makes him feel better. He also revealed to me that he has suffered from addiction to crystal meth. Jon has also experienced homelessness, but some of the other day laborers take him to their homes and also advise him to stop drinking and to return to El Salvador to his family. The other workers do not believe that his family is aware of his health and living conditions. Many of the other workers have serious concerns about his health problems. They believe he has cirrhosis, although he has not disclosed to them the extent of his health issues. For Jon, the hardships of being a migrant worker extend beyond the complexities that other day laborers experience because of his physical and mental illnesses. Jon also worries about the risk of deportation as a result of the multidimensional struggles that he experiences from his mental and physical health and his immigration status.

I'm sad because my family is so far away in El Salvador and they don't know about me, but I don't want to go back. I have to be extra careful because if I get caught I think they will send me back. This is harder for me because of how I feel [mentally and physically].

One morning when I visited the hiring site I was informed that Jon been hospitalized again. While I was there, one of the workers called him on his cellular phone to inform him that I had arrived. He requested to talk to me and asked me to come get him from the hospital. Jon left the hospital against recommendations from the medical staff because of his serious condition. He also revealed to me that he physically attacked the medical staff because they wanted him to remain hospitalized. I picked him from the hospital and took him home to get washed and to get a clean set of clothes because he had left the hospital in the blue hospital clothes, leaving all his belongings behind. The majority of the workers do not agree that Jon continues to work and encourage him to seek help for alcoholism. For the majority of my fieldwork, Jon was homeless and only visited the hiring site to hang out. He seldom worked, only when he expressed that he was healthy enough. But even when he worked, often times, he abandons the work sites because his physical inability to complete the work, especially in the summer months because his health condition deteriorates. Jon explicitly connected his deteriorating health to being separated from his family for a long period of time.

I really need my family. Being away from them has me like this. But I don't want them to see me like this. I would feel shame. I don't tell them anything so that they don't worry.

The majority of the day laborers expressed serious concerns for the health and safety of Jon. They often suggested that if his health continues to deteriorate and he continues to drink, he should go back to El Salvador to be with his family so that they can take care of him in ways that they can't. His situation presented ethical questions about my role as a researcher and my ability to encourage him to seek medical treatment or to encourage him to return to El Salvador to his family. In several occasions, Jon asked me to buy him beer, which I declined and he became upset with me. He also asked me to stop asking him to seek help through the members of the church who visit him or to enter rehabilitation through his hospitalizations. Jon also became upset with me numerous times when I declined to lend him money, as I believed he would purchase alcohol. Several times, Jon joined the church and stopped drinking while he lived with different members of the church, however, every time this has happened he relapsed and later returned to the hiring site to hang out and drink (and seek work) as he became homeless again. He returned to El Salvador after I finished my fieldwork.

Conclusion

The multidimensional struggle of family separation for migrant workers extends beyond economic exploitation to their personal lives and the lives of their families, which for many of them are located physically and emotionally in their home countries. The workers shared the emotional, physical, spiritual, and mental violence that they have endured in this country, particularly the struggles of family separation. Their *testimonios* vary greatly, but collectively they emphasize the multidimensional struggles of family separation. Migrant workers often find themselves negotiating and navigating poverty, exploitation, discrimination, invisibility, mental and physical health, violence, danger, addiction, harassment, and deportation while they are also separated from their families. For some of the workers that participated in this project, these struggles resulted in addiction and other mental health hardships and fear of deportation.

The role of immigration status, socioeconomic status, and race/ethnicity plays a vital role in the life of migrant workers who are out of immigration status. The workers are aware that their status dictates their ability for family reunification. Current immigration policies and the violent, white-supremacist, xenophobic Trump regime also contribute to the hardships and barriers of family reunification that interrupt family structures and are as traumatic as violent kidnappings and deportations. In addition, families that have recently migrated to the US may have experienced trauma in the form of violence, abuse, or human trafficking. Separating such families at the border or within the US re-traumatizes, increasing the risk of mental health issues (Simha, 2019). For the parents, the additional burden of providing for their families, while experiencing labor intensive work and low paying jobs results in social and emotional trauma.

New Directions

Recently, scholars have placed Indigenous migrants within a larger set of contexts that include indigenous peoples in the US. Today, Indigenous migrants are living in spaces shaped by settler colonialism that forces migration, family separation, and trauma from the most vulnerable populations. Research by Najera and Maldonado (2017) on Indigenous migration provides grounds for reconsidering racist narratives of indigeneity and migration. Indigenous migrants face not only racial prejudice and discrimination in the US and in their countries of origin, but also a violent anti-immigrant sentiment rooted in cultural and linguistic differences as well as immigration status, which shape their reception and adaptation (Najera & Maldonado, 2017). Thus, it is important to bring to the forefront of the immigration and family reunification debate the Indigenous migrant experience of struggle as a result of family separation.

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