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## Moving beyond Migrant Disposability: Interrogating History and Identity

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*Moving beyond Migrant Disposability:  
Interrogating History and Identity*

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### Acknowledgements

*As my time at Portland State winds down to an end, and as I hold my Honors Thesis in my hands, I would like to acknowledge and rightfully thank the forces that have led me to where I stand today. Firstly, I would like to thank the soils, the nutrients, the water and the earth that allows life to flourish. In a world that continues to become distant from the role nature holds in our lives, I thank the blue skies, the cherry blossoms, the tree trunks and the dirt that has grounded me throughout my life as a student, as a writer and as a living being. Secondly, I would like to acknowledge the Indigenous peoples whose land Portland State was built on: the Multnomah and Clackamas peoples. Under this White institution it is necessary, to honor the forced sacrifices, the memory, the lives and the descendants of the original inhabitants of this land. I study, I research, and I write as a guest to this land. Thirdly, I would like to thank my mother and my father, I will name them here, in this writing that will occupy academic space, as I choose to center their bodies in a world of academia they will never know due to their economic disenfranchisement from education. Maribel Morales Cendejas, Francisco Mora Ochoa, mami, papi. Your names will remain here, taking up space in this institution, as I thank you for your determination to watch your hija be the first to graduate from college. Les doy gracias, estas palabras son para ustedes, mi título es para ustedes, los amo para siempre. Fourthly, I thank my beautiful siblings and my adoring friends that supported me when I thought I would not be able to watch myself walk across that graduation stage, thank you for your light and energy. And lastly, I thank the Womxn of Color and Queer Womxn that have shared fruitful, emotional and passionate discussions and connections with me throughout my time at PSU; thank you for being my mentors and inspirations. It takes a village to graduate, and you are all mine. Thank you.*

### *Who am I?*

I am taking the liberty to craft my thesis defying the conventions of what we think research is supposed to look like, defying the structure of how we think research is supposed to be presented, and defying the ways we validate what counts as knowledge and what doesn't. Before you read what my thesis is about, as my thesis is an extension of myself, I offer you an invitation to a glimpse of who I am.

My name is Marisol Mora Cendejas. Marisol directly translates to ocean and sun, in my mother tongue, Spanish. I was born in Tijuana, Mexico, right on the edge of the Southwestern U.S. border, as my parents had just returned from their honeymoon in Salem, Oregon. When I was five, my father and older brother, who both had U.S. documentation, took a bus up North to California, as my mother, my sister and I took a bus down South to my mother's hometown in Michoacán.

At the age of five, I learned the heartbreak of family separation, as I was forced to undergo 18 long months without seeing my father and my best friend, my brother. As a child, trying to understand why I couldn't see my father, trying to understand what it meant that he had to work in the fields of Soledad, California to get his wife and daughters green cards and that it was these pieces of documentation keeping us apart, was not something I was able to comprehend. I, unlike so many, had it easier, because my dad was finally able to fulfill his promise and I was able to enter the United States with documentation.

But so many of my loved ones, both by blood and those I have grown up in community with, were not afforded this same reality. For 20 years of my life, I have watched those that I love struggle as they move through the world in an Undocumented body. Fathers unable to take

their children to a doctor's checkup because they do not qualify for health insurance, mothers unable to drive far distances to find work because they cannot obtain drivers licenses, having to choose between survival and between putting herself in danger without necessary documentation, children scared to open up to their teachers because silence around authority figures is ingrained into them from a young age, daughters and sons being taught from a young age there is a chance one day mami or papi can be taken away, youth growing up in the only country they have ever known only to realize they cannot reap the benefits of their education because they are undocumented, students in college missing meals to pay for college because they cannot receive financial aid from the federal government, bodies moving through the world terrified of making the wrong move, of walking slightly too fast, of speaking a little too loudly, of looking a little too long, any tiny move of the body that will draw attention and put them at the risk of being deported.

These are the realities that I have been immersed in my whole life, this is the normal that so many I love have to live through, this is the reality of the violence the United States endorses through its borders, its immigration system, its detention centers, its policies and its rhetoric. I know this to be true.

I know this to be true but I also know that for this to count as truth in the world that we live in, I must engage in hierarchical discourse and inaccessible research so that these truths may be recognized as epistemology, or in other more accessible words, as knowledge. Epistemology refers to the production of knowledge, this Thesis is a production of knowledge, of my knowledge as a Feminist Scholar, Researcher and Woman of Color moving through the world. It is here, that I want to make it clear that I write through a Feminist Research Standpoint, a

framework I will discuss in my methodologies section. I end this here, writing that this research is for my tias, my tios, my relatives, my chosen family, my community, those at the front of the Undocumented Movement, those in office trying to make a change, this is for all of you. And so I write in a way that is accessible to those on the ground, those doing the work, those that cannot access higher education, those that have not been afforded the language to name their own intersected identities and conditions.

### *Abstract*

Although much of the literature surrounding forced migration establishes the relationship in between mental distress and the process of forced migration, there is a gap in the literature which specifically illuminates the *direct* relationship undocumentedness has to mental health and that shows mental health is a significant aspect of the “undocumented experience”. My research questions grapple with the way Latin American migrant groups within the United States have been impacted by undocumentedness as I illuminate this direct relationship. I narrow my research to a literature review and a feminist media analysis as I pose the two questions: 1) How has migrant disposability allowed the United States to absolve itself over responsibility in the ongoing Latin American migrant crisis? and 2) How are migrant disposability and resilience presented in the documentary narratives of Undocumented Latin Americans? Key theoretical issues that my research questions contend with are critical race theory, border politics, and state violence. These frameworks allow me to call urgency to an intersection that is often under-prioritized in feminist studies: citizenship and undocumentedness. I hope to build on feminist epistemology by filling the gap of missing stories and silenced voices of undocumented Latin American forced migrants residing in the U.S.

### *A Radical Approach to Oneself*

As I contended with writing this thesis, I thought back to the first course I ever took for my Women's Studies Major in the Fall of 2016. Introduction to Women's Studies with Vicki Reitaneur, my now Thesis advisor. The first week of the course, Vicki had us read "Claiming an Education" by Adrienne Rich. Rich's important essay served as a transformative piece to my feminist education and to this day, continues to ground my studies.

In her text, Rich states, "there is a more essential experience that you owe yourselves, one which courses in women's studies can greatly enrich, but which finally depends on you, in all your interactions with yourself and your world. This is the experience of *taking responsibility toward yourselves*" (Rich, 1977, p. 609). It was here that my perspective on radical education changed. Contrary to my education up until that point, where standardized testing, digestible information without critical thinking, Eurocentric thought and dominant epistemology had made up the curricula, here I had Rich and my first Women's Studies professor showing me that this wasn't the only way to learn.

Instead, Rich and Vicki showed me that learning was meant to be immersive not only intellectually but also emotionally, spiritually, politically. Education was not about a grade, a quantification of my learning, but of what I would take from that course with me beyond the class, what I would apply into my everyday, into my own reality, into my community and my activism. It was through Rich and Vicki that I learned the significant role I had in the classroom as a student; not only was I there to learn, I was there to be *learned from*. How powerful to be told in the classroom, a space in which one must navigate the system of power exchange and the

dynamics it sets forth, that I was worthy of being learned from? That my poetry, my experiences and my emotional labor were not only fruitful but *critical* in dialogue and theorizing. It was here that I began a journey of introspection with my education, it was here that I learned how to pick up the pen and point it to the page, it was here that I found my voice as a Woman of Color Theorist. Claiming my education, taught me how to bring my intersected identities into both public and private spaces, whether it be academia, advocacy work or my own healing, I learned how to bring my whole self into those spaces.

I have been equipped with the tools and feminist methodologies to write this in a way that is useful so that those reading can actively engage in critical thinking, name their own positions and learn from me, the way I have learned from all of the feminist thinkers that have cultivated my own feminist thought. I write this so that whomever is reading can pick up their own pen, vocalize their own conditions and build community. Thank you Adrienne Rich, Vicki Reitenauer, Lisa Weasel, Audre Lorde, Cherrie Moraga, Gloria Anzaldua, Sandra Cisneros, Kimberle Crenshaw, Sara Ahmed and the countless other feminist thinkers whose trajectory I join.

### ***Feminist Methodologies and Project Outline***

*Feminist Practice Research: A Primer*, edited by Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber serves as the primary vessel from which my methodologies are derived. In, “Feminist Empiricism and Standpoint Theory: Approaches to Understanding the Social World”, Naples and Gurr discuss the tenets of positivism and explain how feminist analyses of objectivity occupy a different relationship to objectivity. The authors detail the trajectory of *empiricism*, a way of knowing (and producing knowledge) whose doctrine is that “all knowledge derives from sensory



experience, exists relatively uniformly outside of social contexts, and is validated as true by its replicability through objective measurements” (Naples & Gurr, 2013, p. 47). The authors illustrate how the emphasis of empiricism being the replicability of experience prompted the development of the scientific method, founded in its reliance on hypotheses and experimental situations. Further down into the 20th century, the scientific method and its empirical underpinnings became linked to positivism, “an epistemological theory that holds that only knowledge that can be proven experientially— through the physical senses—is scientifically valid” (Naples & Gurr, 2013, p. 48).

Naples and Gurr describe that many feminist scholars have embraced the tenets of empiricism to uncover and correct “sexist and androcentric assumptions in method, theory, and findings”, however, there are also those feminist scholars that argue “scientific ‘neutrality’ and ‘objectivity’ serve to mystify the inherently ideological nature of research in the human sciences and to legitimate privilege based on class, race, and gender” (Harding, 1995, p. 186). Naples and Gurr refer to Harding’s significant work as they expand on the notion of feminist objectivity. Here they write, “Strong objectivity acknowledges that the production of power is a political process and that greater attention paid to the context and social location of knowledge producers will contribute to a more ethical and transparent result” (Naples & Gurr, 2013, p. 52).

As explained above, feminist analyses of objectivity understand that the social location of knowledge producers must be acknowledged and addressed in the given research, because there is no true objectivity, rather it is these intersected positions and privileges that shape what a researcher asks, what a researcher is interested in, how they execute their research and the research that is produced. Rather than ignore epistemologies and knowledge building are a clear

site in which power is practiced, feminist researchers that contend with objectivity, argue that illuminating these positionalities helps to not only interrogate but also deconstruct those power relations. This can be referred to as feminist standpoint theory and reflexivity. As a feminist standpoint researcher myself, I go into my research acknowledging my identities, both the sites of oppression and privilege they hold, and I use my identities to express why I carry out my research in the way I do and what my relationship is to the communities it affects.

Research and theory, although their language and ideas can be perplexing, elitist and seem abstract, have real world implications. Research and theory can be used to serve the vehicles of social change and social justice through curricula, policymaking, politics, media, consciousness raising, etc. This is why I believe reflexivity is necessary to avoid producing or engaging in knowledge that is harmful to the communities it speaks on, that is harmful in contributing to dominant and controlling narratives about a specific group or community. By acknowledging the relationship one holds to that which one studies, we become aware of the implications both direct and indirect that our studies and research will have beyond the scope of academia. How is one giving agency to those which we study, how is one incorporating oneself and one's storytelling into our bodies of academic research? How is one centering indigenous bodies of knowledge, oral collections of knowledge and that knowledge which is not stamped as valid under the elite world of academia?

As I contend with these questions, I strive to answer them *by* producing accessible knowledge, by choosing methods that relieve my target communities from additional labor in my research and thus focusing on feminist media analyses. I choose the feminist media analysis of documentary films because it is a location which is not deemed as legitimate in many

non-feminist academic spaces, I choose this method because I understand these stories are not afforded the space to be told or be counted as truth in the very sites that control what is seen as truth and what is not. Using feminist standpoint theory to reflect on my own lived experience of being an immigrant in the United States, I understand the strenuous emotional labor that goes into having an individual, especially one that is Undocumented, recite, verbalize and perform their narrative and story. As a student in higher education that at this point in my life, does not have the resources to properly compensate those individuals for their emotional labor, I did not feel morally comfortable using the method of in-depth interviewing to incorporate that component into my research. As I continue to engage in community organizing around immigration, after higher education, it is a project that I will put energy into.

Thus for this specific project, I chose to execute two qualitative components. The first component is a literature review in which I examined the surrounding literature on forced migration, the destabilization of Latin America and mental health in forced migrant communities. This literature review primarily includes peer reviewed journals, however, I felt it important to add a few media pieces to explore the current political climate on immigration, which has not yet been published in academic journals. For the second part of my qualitative research, I chose to conduct a feminist media analysis of three documentaries that centered on the undocumented narratives of Latin American forced migrants. The three documentaries that I chose to conduct close readings on are, “Don’t Tell Anyone (No Le Digas a Nadie)”, “New American Girls”, and “Forbidden: Queer and Undocumented in Rural America”. These three documentaries were chosen on the requirements that they meet the following criteria: must be a documentary, must focus on Latin American groups, must take place within the United States.

The most prominent limitations to this research were time and resources. If the project was to be extended in the future, an additional component of in-depth interviews with individuals from the documentary team and folx researched would be included. As one individual researcher, the amount of documentary films that can be thoroughly analyzed in the given project time, is limited. Due to the nature of documentary films and their lack of funding, as well as the lack of awareness on immigration statuses within the United States, this limited the available pool for documentary films to choose from that centered on Undocumentation as a thematic issue.

### ***Thesis Introduction***

To first contextualize the issue of forced migration, we must turn to the very language of the phrase. Forced migration, how is it defined? To answer the question of how forced migration is defined, we can analyze its definition through three different lens; legally, academically and politically. On their website, the United Nations High Commissioner of Refugees (UNHCR), an international organization working to globally strategize and assist refugees and persons of concern, breaks down their definition of “forced migrants”. Here they write that, “‘Forced migration’ is not a legal concept, and similar to the concept of ‘migration’, there is no universally accepted definition. It covers a wide range of phenomena. Refugees, on the other hand, are clearly defined under international and regional refugee law, and states have agreed to a well-defined and specific set of legal obligations towards them. Referring to refugees as ‘forced migrants’ shifts attention away from the specific needs of refugees and from the legal obligations the international community has agreed upon to address them. To prevent confusion, UNHCR

avoids using the term ‘forced migration’ to refer to refugee movements and other forms of displacement” (unhcr.org).

Here it is clear that there is a *legal* difference that creates the distinction between refugees and forced migrants under the eyes of international law. Refugees are specifically defined and protected in international law. Expanding on this notion, the UNHCR describes that, “The specific legal regime protecting the rights of refugees is referred to as ‘international refugee protection’. The rationale behind the need for this regime lies in the fact that refugees are people in a specific predicament which calls for additional safeguards. Asylum-seekers and refugees lack the protection of their own country” (unhcr.org). Asylum was not addressed internationally until the 1951 Convention related to the Status of Refugees [the ‘1951 Convention’] was adopted. This was mandated by the UNHCR which was tasked to supervise its implementation. To summarize the status of current refugee protocol, the UNHCR, further details that, “The 1951 Convention and its 1967 Protocol, as well as regional legal instruments, such as the 1969 OAU Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa, are the cornerstone of the modern refugee protection regime. They set forth a universal refugee definition and incorporate the basic rights and obligations of refugees” (unhcr.org). From this legal standpoint, we can see that Refugee status is clearly named, defined, protected and regulated legally through international bodies such as the UNHCR as well as national bodies such as the OAU now known as the AU.

On the other hand, “A uniform legal definition of the term ‘migrant’ does not exist at the international level” and the UNHCR refers to each group separately stating that, “Blurring the terms ‘refugees’ and ‘migrants’ takes attention away from the specific legal protections refugees

require, such as protection from *refoulement* and from being penalized for crossing borders without authorization in order to seek safety” (unhcr.org). In the legal language of what constitutes refugee status under the UNHCR, they define refugees as, “people outside their country of origin because of feared persecution, conflict, violence, or other circumstances that have seriously disturbed public order, and who, as a result, require ‘international protection’ . Their situation is often so perilous and intolerable, that they cross national borders to seek safety in nearby countries, and thus become internationally recognized as ‘refugees’ with access to assistance from states, UNHCR, and relevant organizations. They are so recognized precisely because it is too dangerous for them to return home, and they therefore need sanctuary elsewhere. These are people for whom denial of asylum has potentially deadly consequences” (unhcr. org). Here, we can see that it is feared persecution, conflict, violence or *other* circumstances that have *disrupted* public order, that qualify someone into the category of refugee; there is a specific emphasis on the level of *perceived danger* that qualifies this status, as the UNHCR states that those under refugee status becomes refugees of international law *because* remaining in their country of origin is too dangerous and can be deadly.

One of the most prominent examples in contemporary global affairs we can think of to locate this framework, is the refugee crisis of the Middle East. Full-blown civil wars rage in Iraq, Libya, Syria, and Yemen spilling over to neighboring countries and contributing to the destabilization of the region (Pollack, 2016, p. 62). Holistically, the world is witnessing the highest recorded levels of displacement with, “An unprecedented 65.6 million people around the world [having] been forced from home by conflict and persecution [recorded] at the end of 2016” (un.org). 55% of refugees originated from three countries: South Sudan, Afghanistan and

Syria (un.org) with Syria being the world's biggest producer of refugees at 5.5 million. Using this example, we can see what kinds of critical conditions, like war, persecution and deadly violence constitute an individual as a refugee.

Contrarily, the difference of what constitutes an individual as a forced migrant and not as a refugee, returns once more to the idea of *perceived danger*. The UNHCR has a section on their website with the question, "Do migrants really always 'choose' to migrate?", to which they respond, "The factors leading people to move can be complex. Often the causes are multi-faceted. Migrants may move across international borders to improve their lives by finding work, or in some cases for education, family reunion, or other reasons. People may also move to alleviate significant hardships that arise from natural disasters, famine, or extreme poverty. Those who leave their countries for these reasons would not usually be considered refugees under international law" (unhcr.org). Here we can underline the circumstances that would constitute an individual falling under the category of migrant, from economic hardships, extreme poverty to famine. Using a lens of migrant disposability, I seek to highlight the *perceived danger* and the politics of *choice*, that states award to one specific group and issue over the other, whereas war qualifies someone as a refugee and thus as deserving of protection under international law, cartel and gang violence would not constitute the same qualification and thus protection.

By comparing these two issues, I do not mean to outweigh one or the other or to say that one is more or less deserving of protection, but instead by analyzing the specific language of what constitutes *perceived danger* and how the politics of choice function in this legal framework, I seek to illuminate the migrant disposability and state violence that functions to

create these categories of perceived danger and what danger counts as deserving of legal protection. Those under refugee status should indisputably be protected by any and all states and should legally be able to transcend any border, this is certain; however, through my research I hope to show that the colonial legacies of violence and imperialism in the region of Latin America, are *too* deserving of being addressed through the migrant crisis that dominates the U.S. Southwestern borderlands.

It is clear that in international legal frameworks and policies, refugees and migrants are classified as two separate categories. Whereas states are required to address the needs and protections of refugees, states are not required to protect those forced migrants that cross their borders without authorization; this creating a specific lived reality for undocumented forced migrants. By grounding this issue, once again, in the concept of *perceived danger* and the politics of choice, we are able to see how this contributes to the overall disposability of migrants. States and international bodies hold the power to decide and define what constitutes an individual or an issue as deserving of international legal protection, so by inspecting *perceived danger* and *expanding* its definition and *what* counts as legitimate, urgent *perceived danger*, a new framework can be situated to alleviate the migrant crisis and allow forced migrants an international policy of protection from border violence, undocumented and deportation.

Politically, the UNHCR writes that, “Some policymakers, international organizations, and media outlets understand and use the word ‘migrant’ as an umbrella term to cover both migrants and refugees. For instance, global statistics on international migration typically use a definition of ‘international migrant’ that would include many asylum-seekers and refugees” (unhcr.org). However, they add that, doing this can lead to confusion and be harmful to the



safety and lives of refugees. They state that, “‘Migration’ is often understood to imply a voluntary process, for example, someone who crosses a border in search of better economic opportunities. This is not the case for refugees, who cannot return home safely, and accordingly are owed specific protections under international law” (unhcr.org). Here it is clear that in public political discourse, although refugees can be put under the forced migrant category, because of the legal differences, bodies like the UNHCR advise against conflating the two. Analyzing the way forced migrants are talked about in public discourse, only highlights the concept of *perceived danger* even further; as forced migrants are seen as individuals making *voluntary* choices about their migration and border crossing, *even* when more perilous circumstances underlay their move like gang violence, cartel violence, political corruption, famine and poverty, circumstances which are *not* covered under refugee status or qualified for international protection.

Putting a focus on the language of how forced migrants are talked and written about, shows us the way that states absolve themselves of responsibility to address these forced migrants by using the concept of “voluntary migration” to their power and benefit. As a critical race thinker and feminist standpoint researcher, we understand the word, “voluntary” holds critical weight. We can contest that concept, those politics of choice. If you come from a country where cartel violence and poverty are raging, if you come from a country where ecological imperialism has created hazardous conditions destroying your homelands and your body, if you come from a country where the United States has reinforced neoliberalism and global capitalism—policies which have created a government that puts the focus of human rights issues on the people’s shoulders and not their own—the reality of the situation is that, migrating is not

*voluntary*, not when your country is failing to protect you, and the global powers bordering your own home are refusing to acknowledge their role in how they have destabilized the region. This context I speak of is what makes up the region of Latin America. In discussing the forced migrants of Latin America, it is also necessary to discuss the powers and history that have created the conditions forcing people to migrate. Below, I will dive into the literature on forced migration as an academic subject, before drawing connections on the historical conditions of Latin American forced migration and how migrant disposability has functioned in Latin America.

### ***Reviewing The Literature on Forced Migration***

One of the grounding texts to introduce the topic of forced migration within the academic discourse community it is situated in is, “Forced Migration: Local Conflicts and International Dilemmas”, by William B. Wood. In this text, Wood defines migration as “a permanent or semi-permanent change of residence, usually across some type of administrative boundary” (Wood, 1994, p. 607). Wood reminds one that it is important to understand that while the preoccupation of the media, political leaders and others focus on the *minority* of migrants that cross an international boundary particularly those in Europe and North America this, “slights the much larger number who never make it out of their country” (Wood, 1994, p. 607). This felt extremely significant for me to directly include in the beginning of this literature review because although my research question focuses on those forced migrants that *do* move across international boundaries, I recognize there are millions of migrants that do not have access to this option and I recognize there are countless Indigenous communities that remain in their home countries because of the sacred connection to the land and ancestry they reside in, and as critical as their

conditions may be, many migrants do not ever migrate outside of their own country, as Wood explains.

In the same way that I strive to illuminate those forced migrants that are not named in international law, Wood writes that refugees and asylum seekers only represent a small number of those who flee because of “violent discrimination, civil unrest, and other life threatening economic and ecological conditions”, and rather, in his paper, attempts to clarify the causes of these non-voluntary migrations (Wood, 1994, p. 608). Wood describes the scope of migration studies at the time of his research, writing that they ranged from “microscale psychological analyses of migrant decision-making to macroscale economic models of labor flows between the periphery and the core of the world economy” adding that “though most migration theories accent economic factors at the expense of coercive elements, some theorists are taking into account cultural, ethnic, and political influences. At the international level, for example, migration research is increasingly conceptualized within an interdependent but unequal world economic system” (Wood, 1994, p. 608). Wood explores how migrations, whether, “forced, “strongly-encouraged”, or “voluntary”, are contrary to belief *collective processes* that include key groups such as prospective employers and institutions such as immigration agencies that all profoundly work together to affect whether an individual has the option or means to relocate and how this will affect their process of migration. Wood writes the following passage: “Forcibly uprooted migrants are often affected by the same factors that affect most other types of migrants. These include: declining real incomes and large personal investments in the migration process; disparities of incomes and opportunities between the place of origin and potential destinations; kinship networks that provide critical information and support; new experiences of ethnic tension

and discrimination as an ‘outsider’; loss of traditional social status; new educational and language barriers; and weakening of traditional values in the face of powerful, foreign cultural forces. But insofar as policymakers take the narrow view that forced migrations are problems of ‘humanitarian relief’ that are separable from their political-economic contexts—at local, national, and international levels, their efforts will amount to little more than reactions to the latest refugee crisis” (Wood, 1994, p. 608). There are several insights to note from this excerpt. First, Wood details some of the factors that can cause migrants to be uprooted from their homes, these including economic disparities and kinship networks that provide critical information and support. If we refer back to the section written on the way that the UNHCR defines forced migrants and what kinds of migration factors categorize someone as a forced migrant without legal protections, *these* are two of the very factors. It is clear here how the academic scholarship is linked to current political discourse and policy-decisions, from the very language of the word “voluntary” ascribed to forced migrants, to what experiences garner legal protections.

These push factors that Wood notes are classified as “impelled” rather than “forced” where in the former migrants have a choice over destinations and in the latter no options are permitted. Wood argues that it is hard to place this distinction in the current Third World contexts, “where coercion ranges from explicit governmental actions against an individual to life-threatening socioeconomic or environmental conditions experienced by the entire population of an area” (Wood, 1994, p. 609). Here Wood calls on Huyck and Bouvier, scholars in his discourse community, who note a key criterion for coercion, “namely that ‘failure to migrate would likely result in destructive consequences including imprisonment and even death for the potential refugee’. They lament that most refugee studies focus on political persecution and

ignore environmental and economic motivations” (Wood, 1994, p. 609). Even within refugee studies at the time most discourse focused on the political persecution qualifying an individual as a refugee, this, which is also reflected in *today’s* current refugee status under the 1951 Convention. Famine, severe poverty and environmental conditions, do not qualify someone to obtain refugee status, however, as Wood and other scholars argue, environmental and economic motivations and conditions need to be addressed and protected under refugee status. Were these to be protected, millions of the Undocumented forced migrants in the United States from Latin America would have to be addressed by the state and recognized as deserving of legal protection, rather than immigration raids and deportations increasing, which make those forced migrants vulnerable within the state’s institutions. Wood calls for a new model on forced migration flows to be used; in this model, there are three categories which overlap as the criteria to constitute someone as forcibly displaced. These three categories are: War/Political Instability/Persecution, Ethnic/Religious/Tribal Conflicts and Ecological Crisis/Life Threatening Economic Decline. This is a model I argue, international law should look towards when setting the conditions of who counts as a refugee, who is perceived as a refugee, and who is granted international protections. In this model, Wood illustrates arrows leading from these three overlapping circles to three international migrant flow categories: Refugees/Asylum Seekers, Legal Immigrants/Guest Workers and Illegal immigrants. In this model we can see, the ways that a migration flow can be received in a state depending on the legal frameworks ascribed to each. Wood, alongside my research, argues that: “for those who have left their countries, including refugees and ‘illegals,’ survival depends more often on host governments and international relief agencies. Although both subnational and international forced migrants share many of the same

fears and needs, the former are at greater risk of further oppression and are shorn of the institutional support that is provided to legal refugees” (Wood, 1994, p. 615).

Although we can use feminist re-envisioning of legal frameworks to imagine the needed expansion for these frameworks to address and protect forced migrants, we must also, ground ourselves in the reality the current legal frameworks create. This is what Wood points to as he writes that undocumented forced migrants are further oppressed and shorn of institutional support that is provided to legal refugees (Wood, 1994, p. 615). Forced migrants that cross international boundaries into a new state and manage to settle there, in this research, can be referred to as Undocumented peoples. Which brings me to my direct research argument that undocumented forced migrants experience mental health distress as a direct effect of being undocumented. Now that the literature has been discussed on the general state of forced migrants and the very language used for forced migrants, we can explore the literature that contextualizes the mental health subset of forced migration.

### ***Mental Health as Presented in the Literature***

Within the literature on forced migration it is well established that forced migration is a complex process that affects individuals on a multitude of aspects which can all have interrelated impacts on these individuals. Literature documenting the psychological issues refugees and forced migrants experience show that forced migration is considered a traumatic process (Fazel, Wheeler, & Danesh, 2005). Cheka Gulsen et al, explain that refugees and migrants’ vulnerability

to mental disturbances largely stem from the nature of migration in itself; the demands of cultural adaptation, a disadvantaged socioeconomic position, and the loss of pre-existing social networks all create social, economic, and psychological tension within those who have had to migrate (Gulsen et al, 2010). This tension combined with the trauma that many forced migrants have been exposed to prior to migrating, from cartel violence, political violence, ethnic rivalry, to civil wars, lead to an increased vulnerability for mental health disorders and problems. In a study Cheka Gulsen et al published, they found that nearly half of the Kurdish women they interviewed and assessed, who were either internally displaced in Turkey or who had migrated to a country in the EU, experienced Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, and although their specific research showed the internally displaced women had higher numbers of PTSD, they still recorded high numbers of PTSD amongst the migrant women and the authors note “notwithstanding the limitations, the present study provides needed documentation of the sequential stressors experienced by individuals who have migrated from Turkey to a country in the EU. It is precisely the cluster of traumatic and migration factors that mental health care providers have to address in service application to traumatized migrants” (Gulsen et al, 2010). PTSD is not the only mental health disorder that has been documented in the literature about forced migration, scholars like Ken Miller have written about the mental health concerns of and related to depression, social isolation, family conflict, and substance abuse (Miller, 2008).

Forced migrants who successfully enter a state without documentation and manage to settle there, then become one of the most vulnerable populations residing within that state, due to their lack of lawful presence. In my research, I argue that undocumented people that have integrated into a new nation, face specific mental health concerns that are directly connected to

their undocumented status and that are prevalent in the “undocumented experience”; in addition I also argue that mental health and politics cannot be separated living in an undocumented body.

There are many elements that constitute the “undocumented experience” as a forced migrant which directly shape the mental wellbeing or lack thereof, of undocumented peoples. These elements can be divided into three different categories, legal, political and social although all of these inform one another. Through the literature reviewed, I was able to pinpoint these three categories and analyze the direct impact they have on undocumented peoples’ mental health. It is important to note that these different elements have the impact they do on these individuals specifically *because* of their status and position as undocumented.

Due to the over representation of the Southwestern Borderlands (Mexico/U.S. border) in the media and the U.S. political sphere that negatively racializes, criminalizes, and produces harmful epistemologies of Latin American migrants, and because a high percentage of unauthorized residents in the U.S. are of Mexican origin (58% in 2012), deportation policies disproportionately affect Mexicans and forced migrants from Central and larger Latin America (Dreby, 2012). Living as an undocumented resident then, while trying to survive day to day, trying to establish community, building a family, going to school, finding employment, and simply existing, becomes a challenge when every day, existing in an undocumented body comes with the fear of deportation, the fear of disclosing your identity, the shame of disclosing your status, the anxiety of interactions with authority figures-teachers, police officers, the law-all.

All of this fear, shame, guilt, anxiety, and mental processing of one’s “illegality” create a simultaneous stress on undocumented peoples that stem from their lack of legal status and that



can directly lead to mental health disorders like panic disorder, generalized anxiety, depression, and PTSD (Garcini et al, 2017). A study conducted by Caitlin Patler et al, just published February, 2018, surveyed Latino youth in California from 2014-2015, that for the first time in a recorded journal, demonstrated the positive emotional consequences of transitioning out of undocumented status for Immigrant young adults, thus reiterating the relationship of legality on mental wellbeing for undocumented peoples (Patler, 2018). This study surveyed DACA recipients, following the way their mental health improved with their attainment of DACA, a program that was initiated under the Obama Administration. This leads into my next portion of my literature review, analyzing the relationship in between politics and mental health for undocumented peoples.

DACA was a program introduced in the U.S. for forced migrants that were brought into the U.S. as children younger than 16, who upon meeting this criteria became eligible to attain a form of temporary documentation that allowed them to obtain a work permit and social security number. Patler et al's study documents the positive benefits that this initiative had on DACA recipients in a scholarly setting, however numerous accounts of this same concept are available in documentaries like "No le digas a nadie" ("Don't Tell Anyone")—which will be discussed in the Film analyses portion of my research— as well as numerous media articles, interviews, radio shows, etc. This discussion of DACA is important to highlight as a case study for how politics impact undocumented mental health, because in the same way that initiatives and policies related to undocumented status can positively impact individuals' mental health, negative policies can also cause negative mental health consequences. The rise in immigrant hostility rhetoric in the U.S. documented in media shows that existing as undocumented without feeling the ripples of the

political climate you are immersed in (nationally and locally), is not a possibility, the ending of DACA as a pathway and program being one of these examples. Those that had qualified and were receiving DACA, now that the program was ended by President Trump and a Clean Dream Act has failed to pass in the legislature, have voiced their mental health has felt the negative impacts. Increased deportations, raids, and anti-undocumented sentiments that all form the political climate undocumented communities are immersed in, have all increased my interviewee's anxiety levels, mood instability, feelings of hopelessness, and trauma. The findings from my ethnographic data are also reflected in a journal study that was just published May of 2018. This study is titled, "Impacts of Immigration Actions and News and the Psychological Distress of U.S. Latino Parents Raising Adolescents" and it explores how Latino parents face unprecedented threats to family stability and wellbeing due to "rapid and far-reaching transformations in U.S. immigration policy" (Roche, et al, 2018).

The last element that affects undocumented peoples' mental health is the social aspect. Family stability falls under this category, as do navigating social institutions like higher education and lack of access to resources, and identity crises. Undocumented residents do not qualify for welfare, social benefits, U.S. government food insecurity relief programs like WIC/Food Stamps, or healthcare-living as a resident under all of these constraints means that it is harder to find access for wellbeing and mental health resources for those who do struggle with mental health disorders, which can worsen untreated disorders and put individuals at higher risk for suicide. Trying to process one's undocumented status and dealing with all of the social shame and stress this creates, trying to balance biculturalism, and feeling like a part of a nation while being denied citizenship under the state, all constitute the identity crises undocumented residents

can face. *Lives in Limbo*, a book written by Roberto Gonzales, a professor of Education at Harvard University, follows 150 undocumented individuals in California for 12 years, and “exposes the failures of a system that integrates children into K-12 schools but ultimately denies them the rewards of their labor”; similarly Garcini’s study cited earlier, which gathers ethnographic data on undocumented Mexicans living near the California/Mexico border, shows how undocumented Mexicans who have integrated into the nation’s culture, language, and education systems, face identity crises as they are still treated as third class citizens and are denied legality in the state of this nation they consider themselves a part of.

From the literature I have reviewed it is clear to see the unique way that legal, political, and social elements directly impact the mental health of undocumented peoples and specifically Latin American forced migrants residing in the U.S.

### ***The Destabilization of Latin America***

How is the mental health of Latin American forced migrants connected to the concept of migrant disposability? Now that we understand the inaccessibility of documentation and legal protections available to Latin American forced migrants as the model of migration flows which would expand this access, is not in use, and now that we understand there is a direct relationship on how undocumented creates mental distress and vulnerability to mental illness within Undocumented individuals, we can connect these findings to the history. The destabilization of Latin America.

To ground this issue of destabilization, we must first turn to Latin America’s colonial history of violence. European forces first began to colonize Latin America in the 1500’s, beginning with Tenochtitlan, the heart of the Aztec empire, and expanding further South. By

murdering Indigenous leaders and inserting themselves at the top of these civilization's hierarchies, European colonizers were able to exert control over the peoples and lands of Latin America. Not only did these forces bring militia control, weaponry and disease, they also were able to effect the development of economic and political structures that left high levels of social and economic inequality in the region for centuries to come. One of these institutions that was developed was the *encomienda* system, one of the first institutions of exploitation in which, the Spanish Crown granted colonial leaders stolen land and "broad powers, entitling the encomendero to the services of specified native districts" through physical, economic and sexual labor (Rowe, 1957, p. 159). The exploitation of Latin America's land, resources and peoples can also be seen as colonial powers exported and depleted Latin America of many of its resources. From gold, minerals and other riches, it became visible that there was an unequal exchange of resources taking place in which European economies and later United States economies were able to develop, advance and directly profit off of the exploitation and depletion of Latin America.

Centuries of colonization and its unequal exchange have led to the current world order in which Latin America stands severely impoverished, depleted, and in crisis. The legacies of colonialism through the institutions of the colonial project, set up Latin America as a disposable site to be exploited. This directly translated to the way Indigenous peoples and other Latin Americans are perceived in the current world order and international context. The land was seen as inherently disposable, which constructed a complex of disposability of its peoples too. Genocide, the racial caste systems (La Casta) and economic enslavement/exploitation are the underpinnings of migrant disposability. It is these histories that mark the way Latin American

forced migrants are perceived today, it is this that places the migrant crisis in its current context. The lack of urgency, dehumanization and controlling narratives of forced migrants as criminals, savages, welfare queens, etc., shape the way the needs and concerns of these communities are addressed. This is why, for urgency and visibility to exist in an international context and U.S. context, this history must be presented.

As imperialism continued to unfold, one of the most significant ways the United States destabilized Latin America is through ecological imperialism. The theory of unequal exchange is one that is highlighted in the discourse on ecological imperialism. In “Ecological Imperialism and the Global Metabolic Rift”, Clark and Foster review the work of several authors to present this theory. They outline the following: “Stephen Bunker highlights how the extraction and exporting of natural resources from peripheral countries (those in Latin America) involved the vertical flow of not only economic value, but also value in terms of energy and matter to more developed countries. These trade arrangements, influenced by the dynamics of the global economy and positions within the world-system, negatively affected and undermined the socio-ecological conditions in the extractive countries. Recent scholarship on ‘ecologically unequal exchange’ has drawn on Bunker’s seminal work, as well as the theory of unequal exchange (Emmanuel, 1972), in order to demonstrate the disproportionate (and undercompensated) transfer of matter and energy from the periphery to the core (Frey, 1994; Hornborg, 2003; Rice, 2007)”. Here we can see the way ecological imperialism functions as the “environmental footprint of economically advanced nations involves appropriation of land, resources, and labor in lesser-developed countries, increasing the environmental degradation in the latter for the benefit of the former” (Clark & Foster, 2009, p. 313).

Ecological imperialism works hand in hand with neoliberalism and global capitalism, two additional mechanisms the United States has employed in Latin America that have wreaked havoc. Due to the debt crisis of the early 1980s the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank managed to pry open the economies of Latin American countries and forcibly implement neoliberal policies that drastically restructured the development of those countries (Gordon & Webber, 2007, p. 66). The debt crisis allowed these international bodies to use neoliberal policies as debt management in economies of the South. Gordon and Webber show how, “through their control of international organisations such as the IMF and the World Bank, countries of the global North have been able to submit countries of the South to their global agenda of political and economic restructuring” (Gordon & Webber, 2007, p. 66). These neoliberal structural adjustment policies, as listed in the Washington Consensus, from liberalization to privatization, “entail the removal of trade and investment barriers for capital from the North, cuts to public services and subsidies to local producers and consumers, and the privatisation of formerly communal land, among other things” (Gordon & Webber, 2007, p. 66). Migrant disposability is once again visible, as we can interrogate the way the United States has enforced neoliberalism and global capitalism in Latin America for its own benefit; policies that have allowed the United States the capital freedom between borders, through multinational corporations and enclave economies, while denying the very peoples of Latin America the same freedom to cross borders. The more the economies of Latin America were opened by the United States, the stricter immigration policy in the United States became.

There are countless examples of how ecological imperialism and neoliberalism have functioned interrelatedly, a few of which I will expand on from gold mining and Guano

extraction in Peru, oil extraction in Ecuador and Mexico, to the usage of transgenic crops in Argentina, Chile and Brazil, these phenomena have shown how neoliberal policies push for primary commodity exporting in Latin America which serves as a platform for ecological imperialism.

Bury describes how in Peru, neoliberal economic and political reforms as part of this exact process, led to “mineral extraction activities [becoming] the key sector for [then] future economic growth, export-led earnings, and foreign direct investment” (Bury, 2004, pg. 221). Here we can understand how neoliberalism and its development reform, contributed to natural resources becoming the primary commodity exports of many Latin American economies, causing the mining industry to expand extensively. This mining expansion alongside “the colonial race for mining exploration and extraction” (Gordon & Webber, 2008, pg. 67) as a result of an imperial legacy in the region of Latin America, worked together to create the historical context for the issue of mining. In Peru, gold mining has caused the critical social impact of dispossession. Dispossession here refers to the Indigenous communities that have been dispossessed of their land, natural resources and livelihoods. As dispossession has ravaged Indigenous communities throughout countless Latin American communities, leaving them without land for homes and agriculture and without resources necessary for survival, Latin America has witnessed the vocalization of Indigenous struggle through social movements, protests and violent conflict (Hughes, 2010, pg. 85). In his discussion of Indigenous protest in Peru, Hughes writes that, “neoliberal reforms are also at the centre of a violent conflict currently playing out in Peru between the government of President Alan Garcı́a and the indigenous peoples of the Peruvian Amazon” (Hughes, 2010, pg. 86). This example highlights one of the

social impacts mining has caused in Peru, as protests have turned into blood baths and harmful neoliberal reforms continue to be at the center of controversy and debate. Returning to Gordon and Webber, we can also see that even when land used for mining investment is not directly inhabited, communities nearby are *still* affected by the environmental repercussions of mining, including: “industrial runoff affecting local water sources, or the destabilisation of the migratory and mating patterns of game and the loss of arable land resulting from the infrastructural development accompanying mining” (Gordon & Webber, 2008, pg. 68).

Harm to poor and Indigenous communities due to foreign mining corporations has taken on many forms, one of these being through open pit mining which presents a threat to communities living around or downstream from goldmines, this evident as Bury shows in describing the mining of the Cajamarca region (Bury, 2004, pg. 230). Through this example we can see that open pit mining has led to a “dramatic shift of of land-cover patterns and a widespread alteration of environmental processes in the region” including altered watercourses (Bury, 2004, pg. 230). Open pit mining has directly affected communities nearby as spatial reordering has led to “a rezoning of household land-use activities across the historically important vertical ecological production zones of the region” (Bury, 2004, pg. 231). In addition to erosion, the formation of sinkholes and the alteration of land patterns, open pit mining also poses a threat to nearby communities and those downstream as the contamination of groundwater by heavy metals and concentrations of minerals, has caused water sources to become contaminated, presenting severe health risks to the communities relying on those water sources.

In the context of Ecuador, Rochlin explains why oil extraction in remote regions of Ecuador has been controversial since the incremental developments in the oil industry. He



explains how millions of hectares were “passed to a Texaco Gulf Consortium in 1965. All this done without the knowledge of the Ecuadorian military government” (Rochlin, 2011, pg. 14). This plus the contract Texaco Gulf had signed with the military government for 1.431 million hectares of land for a 40 year period, “left the effective rule of the Oriente in the hands of Texaco-Gulf”, making the Oriente and the state extremely vulnerable as it was controlled by a foreign entity. This vulnerability combined with Chevron-Texaco’s malpractices in oil drilling led to one of the most catastrophic environmental disasters in recorded history, the Chevron-Texaco Amazon Oil Spill, this disaster acting as another key site of controversy in the region.

Chevron poisoned Ecuador’s rainforest and rivers, causing thousands of Indigenous peoples, *Los Afectados*, to fall ill of various cancers and diseases and die. “The True Story of Chevron’s Ecuador Disaster” illustrates the way that Chevron committed serious malpractices that they would have never committed in the United States, documenting how the corporation chose not to line their Ecuadorian oil pits which released toxins into the ground and documenting the way toxic sludge was directly emitted to Ecuadorian rivers and streams and improperly disposed of (The True Story of Chevron’s Ecuador Disaster). A following video, “Ecuadorian Tribe vs Chevron”, argues there is a harmful double standard present in which oil giants would never treat their oil sites and procedures the way they do internationally in their *own* home countries and in which these international actions would be illegal in. Yet, like in this key case, oil giants and other multinational corporations (MNCs) manage to avoid responsibility for their actions. Using this example as a primary case study, we can see the way MNCs have used their capital, resources, political power and elite connections to ensure they are absolved of

responsibility for ecological and humanitarian damage in Latin America. The concept of disposability is once again visible through this example.

Turning to the agricultural development in Latin America, we can utilize this as a further example of developmental harm in the region. Modern agricultural practices are characterized by large scale farms, single crop production and monocultures, the use of machinery, irrigation water, fertilizers, and pesticides. The rise of modern agriculture practices can be largely attributed to “the 1970s, when science, agriculture, industry, and the state came together to encourage export commodity production” (Wolford, 2008, pg. 643). Due to the power of capitalist and neoliberal ideologies that favor modern agriculture for its easily exploitable industry, state policies upholding modern agriculture practices and corporate controlled chemical agriculture, have affected the resource access of small farmers across Latin America. Altieri and Rojas describe how Chile has undergone significant environmental and social impacts due to Chile’s agricultural neoliberal policies. They write that these impacts have included “the expulsion of hundreds of small farmers from their lands, serious soil erosion, decreased in-stream flows and lowered water tables, and a significant reduction in endangered native species and endemic wildlife populations” (Altieri and Rojas, 1999, pg. 59).

Through these examples, it is clear to see the way the United States continues to exploit, deplete, control and destabilize Latin America. Colonial legacies, ecological imperialism, neoliberalism and global capitalism are the most influential institutions of development and control the United States has utilized in creating these disturbances. It is no accident the very causes that have fueled the conditions for the migrant crisis in Latin America are those which are not afforded international protection under refugee status. Once again, I call upon my argument

that the definition of what conditions count as worthy of qualifying an individual for refugee status need to be expanded and move beyond the harm of migrant disposability. Ecological refugees exist. Economic refugees exist. They just don't want to call us that.

Forced migrants that have been displaced by decades of colonialism and the ongoing imperial project, must be addressed by the United States government. It is this which I put forward as the most critical action that must be acknowledged. It is time the United States take responsibility for the way it has fueled the migrant crisis below its Southwestern borderlands.

### *Film Analyses*

In addition to the central part of my research, the literature review, I wanted to include the narratives of Undocumented Latin Americans to humanize the experiences of these folx and argue there is a direct relationship between undocumented and mental health. I also wanted to illuminate the resiliency of these Undocumented individuals to show how these communities have mobilized through the years to fight for justice under an unjust system.

Film analyses are a powerful tool to gather subjugated knowledge, or in other words that knowledge which is not given the resources, platform or significant space within dominant, mainstream epistemology. By taking a piece of media, like a film, and conducting a feminist media analysis on that specific piece, we are able to investigate a multitude of aspects. Feminist media analysis understands that media has a cultural and societal influence on what a specific society values, what it believes, and its attitudes and views on the people and systems that society enforces. These media pieces reveal the underlying political trends, climates and ideologies that are embedded into the way that that media is created, portrayed and how it contributes to larger dominant epistemology. We can begin to see patterns in the way that

sexism, classism, racism, ableism and other kinds of oppression are portrayed, as well as seeing the way that a piece can reinforce these oppressive ideologies and work to shape society's actions and policies.

For my film analyses I conducted three close readings on the following: “No Le Digas a Nadie”, “New American Girls” and “Forbidden: Undocumented and Queer in Rural America”. I coded the analysis for prominent themes that connected to the gaps in the literature on mental health in forced migration and below expand on these findings.

### *Conducting the Close Readings*

Undocumented struggles and experiences of what it means to be undocumented and how undocumented affects mixed status households and individuals' mental health, are highly erased and invisibilized in mainstream media. To resist this erasure and lack of authentic and empowering representation, undocumented activists like Mikaela Shwer and Angy Rivera have taken to alternative media forums and mechanisms to produce creative work to share the stories of this marginalized community. In a PBS project to fund untold stories for public media and consciousness raising, Mikaela Shwer was able to direct a feature documentary about the personal story and daily life of Angy Rivera, an undocumented Colombian who decides to emerge from the shadows about her immigration status after 24 years of silence.

The documentary is titled, “No Le Digas a Nadie” (Don't Tell Anyone) and was released in 2016. In this documentary we are able to see the silenced mental health experience that is inseparably intertwined with being undocumented. The film follows the life of Angy as she chooses to finally speak up about her status, illuminating family intimacy and relationships, living in a mixed-citizenship status household, facing domestic violence and more. For Angy,

opening up about her status first stems from opening up about surviving sexual assault as a four year old. Angy soon finds how all too common sexual and domestic violence is in Undocumented families who do not have the means to legally report their conditions without risking violence stemming from their undocumented status. The film follows her journey, coming out as a survivor and as Undocumented.

Throughout the film, the title “No Le Digas a Nadie” (Don’t Tell Anyone), holds a symbolic meaning as it reveals the feelings and the political climate that work to teach undocumented folk not to share about their undocumented status. This theme and repeated whisper of *don’t tell anyone, don’t let anyone know, no matter what you never tell anyone* is said by Angy’s mother as she fears the deportation of Angy and the violence that can result from her opening up about her status. 24 years after living in fear, shame and uncertainty Angy Rivera joins the youth-led New York State Youth Leadership Council where she begins to attend pro-immigration rallies and engage in local activism. Soon enough, to her mother’s horror, Angy finds herself in the center of the public eye as she takes on the fight for undocumented justice and sets up an online advice column called “Ask Angy” for undocumented immigrant youth.

In a defining scene, Angy is going to speak at her first undocumented rights rally, and has chosen to wear a shirt that has the words “Undocumented” bolded in red. In the scene, Angy gives a speech to others attending the rally and focuses on the concept of “coming out” as a praxis to locate the process of speaking out about one’s immigration status and undocumented status.

The framing of this scene centers Angy as she gives her speech, the camera panning from Angy, who is shot in the frame the most, but also transitioning to police officers standing nearby. As the camera moves to the law enforcement watching Angy speak, a careful usage of in depth

zoom is employed, showing close-ups of the police car lights, the DHS badges of the officers, their uniforms, and their body language. This in depth focus as we can still hear Angy's voice overlaid over the footage, becomes symbolic of the way that undocumented folx have to constantly feel watched by law enforcement and fear being arrested or deported for speaking out about being undocumented. Angy proudly stating she is undocumented in front of this crowd and in front of the law enforcement shows the courage Angy has developed being involved in activism, as she has finally chosen to stand fearless in front of the very systems that constrain her life. The scene is constructed in a public setting, as Angy organized the first "Coming Out" event in New York in front of the immigration building, created to directly allow undocumented folx the opportunity to share their testimonies.

As Angy prepares for the event there is a 20 second shot of her putting on the t-shirt she has spray painted the words "Undocumented" onto. The camera quality of this clip is grainier compared to the rest, this done to create a webcam kind of feeling in which there is an intimacy and deep emotional connection in between the viewer and Angy as she puts this shirt on in front of the camera. The scene feels private, exposed and vulnerable, almost as if we should not be watching it, conveying the feelings of silence, alienation and shame that go into opening up about being undocumented.

In her speech, Angy talks about how coming out means revealing something publicly about yourself that nobody knows, and on camera and to this crowd of people, for the first time in a public setting Angy "comes out" as undocumented. In these scenes the erotic of public and private is emphasized as we transition in between three shots, first Angy at home, Angy in public, then once again Angy sharing what it felt like to come out. This transition of the private

and public and how these two are entangled, marks this scene as the turning point in the film for breaking Angy's silence. After the title and the film to this point up have told us not to tell anyone, finally Angy has taken agency of her story and her undocumented reality and chosen to *make something* of it. It is through this real, touching, raw and action driven documentary that we see Angy become a voice for undocumented folx and we learn that coming out from the margins to share our stories ignites social change through changing conversations and cultures.

Through this holistic film analysis, we are able to gather how deeply embedded silence about one's status runs in Undocumented communities and through Angy we can see the way this silence and the political climate around her and her inability to feel like a full self under the state's eyes, contribute to her deteriorating mental health, to her anxiety, depression and feelings of hopelessness. This film analysis allows us to understand the culture and climate that sets up the backdrop for undocumented people's mental health and how their relationship to being undocumented severely affects how they experience mental wellbeing, mental health and trauma.

"New American Girls" is a 2014 web series produced by Mitchell Teplitsky and Betty Bastidas for Latino Public Broadcasting following the personal narratives of three "DREAMers". DREAMers referring to the then estimated 1.8 million young adults brought to the USA as children by undocumented parents "who remain stuck in limbo, without a pathway to citizenship" (lppb.org). The three foci of this series — Lorella, Mandeep, and Kassandra — are three of the thousands of DREAMers who have decided to come forward with their stories. For my specific focus on Latin American personal narratives, I only focused on Lorella and Kassandra's stories for my media analyses.

To begin, Cassandra's story follows her as a high school student living in New York City. Brought to the United States from Mexico by Undocumented parents at the age of six, Cassandra recalls knowing she was not like her other peers and classmates and understanding this difference since the fourth grade. Although she understood she was different, the culture of secrecy to protect oneself from state violence such as deportation, as a result shows Cassandra living in the "shadows". These shadows are repeatedly interrogated throughout the documentary and become a significant theme, the shadows of Undocumentation serving as a location of identity.

It is in these shadows that Cassandra is caught in the limbo of, this secrecy and identity binding contributing to her mental distress, anxieties and hopelessness. In Cassandra's story, we see her begin to attend the after school program Sports and Arts in Schools, which is when the adults and authoritative figures around her finally begin to understand her situation. In this space that Cassandra has grown to find as a safe and nurturing outlet outside of the household, she reveals her status for the first time to someone outside her family. This act, this stepping out of the shadows and naming her identity, is seen as a symbolic and significant part of Cassandra's story. Her program coordinators and advisers are interviewed and they share the feeling of hopelessness they felt for Cassandra, until they managed to connect her to Make the Road New York, an immigrant rights organization in the area.

Kassandra's story is placed within the political context of 2012 when the Obama Administration decided to pass DACA, Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals. This immigration program allowed eligible children brought to the United States without documentation, the pathway to temporary documentation. DACA gave those who applied and



qualified a two year deferred period from deportation in which they were able to obtain legal work permits and state ID. Cassandra is shown being able to finally attain a state ID, open a bank account and obtain a legal job. It is here that we can see the positive mental impacts documentation, even temporary documentation, provides. Cassandra expresses the relief of finally having access to these tools; and finally having a hope that there is a way *out*. This context of Cassandra's story connects to a study Patler et al conducted on Latino youth which demonstrated the positive emotional and mental consequences of transitioning out of undocumented status (Patler, 2018), showing this too exists outside of the academic literature.

The second personal narrative presented in "New American Girls" is that of Lorella. Born in Peru, Lorella was involved in a car accident in which she lost her leg at the age of two. Her parents were forced to bring her to the United States for ongoing medical treatment. Due to the economic and medical hardships of their homeland, Lorella's parents decided to settle in the U.S. when she turned ten. Lorella is seen navigating the public education system and citizenship system as she excels in school but cannot qualify for in-state tuition due to lack of documentation and lives in fear of deportation. Lorella's story shows the emotional and mental distress that navigating one-sided systems cultivate for undocumented young adults. In the same way Roberto Gonzales explores this issue in *Lives in Limbo*, "exposing the failures of a system that integrates children into K-12 schools but ultimately denies them the rewards of their labor", Lorella is seen grappling with this same reality (Gonzales, 2015).

A significant theme once again is that of existing in the shadows and emerging from these shadows. Lorella describes the fear, shame and silence that surrounded growing up Undocumented. She explains, "we didn't even talk about it in my family" (pbs.org). This shows

how deeply the culture of silence permeates Undocumented and Mixed Status families. As a disabled, Undocumented woman, resiliency is a central theme in Lorella's narrative. Lorella takes it upon herself to form a student group to mobilize in support of the DREAM Act and to try and change Connecticut's in-state tuition law.

The DREAM Act was first introduced in 2001, an act which would establish a pathway to citizenship for DREAMers, those brought to the U.S. without documentation as minors. To this day, the bill has failed—its most recent failure under the Trump administration, which has used the act as a bargaining chip repeatedly to build “the wall”, one of President Trump's goals in policing the Southwestern borderlands ([washingtonpost.com](http://washingtonpost.com)).

Coming out as Undocumented and Unafraid is a central theme within Lorella's story and the collective of the documentaries I analyzed. Resiliency is seen through this act of naming oneself and speaking up for oneself as these young adults decide to put their lives at risk to break the stigma and silence surrounding undocumentedation.

“Forbidden: Undocumented and Queer in Rural America”, follows the personal narrative of Moises Serran, an Undocumented, Gay man from North Carolina, who faces intersected struggles based on his status, sexuality and limited resources available in a rural area. His story of personal transformation as he emerges from both the closet of undocumentedation and of queerness, inspire audiences to ask reflective questions. “How can we create change in our communities, state and country? How can we cultivate more intersectionality between social justice issues?” ([forbiddendoc.com](http://forbiddendoc.com)). His story directly relates to the 11 million undocumented immigrants currently living in the U.S.

Mental health and the way the political climate affects mental distress is a significant theme within “Forbidden”. Moises states, “I’m starting to talk about another aspect of immigration that is never really talked about. And it’s depression, it’s suicide. Again it’s that psychological damage that our youth have to face every single day. It does something to your mind. It’s psychological warfare that’s happening” (“Forbidden”). Moises highlights the rising numbers of undocumented youth that have turned to suicide because they saw no other options. He powerfully and poignantly shares, “And you know why I’m saying this? It’s because I was there. I was there”. Moises is seen sharing his story in numerous settings, conferences, in front of school boards, decision makers, in churches, in marches, and this powerful remembrance of struggling with the mental distress of undocumentedation so deeply he contemplated suicide when he felt his whole life was confined to undocumentedation, are a captive point in his narrative.

The political climate under the Trump Administration is one that is centered in “Forbidden”. The 2016 politics of Donald Trump running for Presidential office are a major backdrop used to illuminate the violence undocumented and marginalized communities endure through these institutions. Moises discusses how the 2016 Dream Act came five votes short of breaking a Republican led Filibuster. Here he grapples with the weight of 5 people that were able to determine the reality for 2.1 million Undocumented youth. “It makes me feel so small, and unwanted, and disposable.” Migrant disposability is made clear here, as Moises directly shows how it functions in policy making and legislation. Because Latin American forced migrants are not humanized and are instead seen as disposable, it allows the United States to continue to defer the accountability and responsibility it owes to these peoples. “Your whole life is nothing but a political game that is being played by Washington D.C. insiders” (“Forbidden”).

### *Interlocking and Shared Themes*

As I analyzed the findings from my film analyses, I was coding for themes that each narrative shared, from the way identity, mental health, disability and resiliency were presented. After gathering my data, I was able to chart the most prominent themes in the table below.

<b>Film Title</b>	<b>Identity Theme</b>	<b>Mental Distress Theme</b>	<b>Resiliency Theme</b>	<b>Shared themes</b>
<b>"No Le digas a Nadie"</b>	<b>Concept of Coming Out</b>	<b>Political Climate on the Mental Self</b>	<b>Resiliency through Public Activism</b>	<b>All</b>
<b>"Forbidden"</b>	<b>Intersectional Violence of Silence</b>	<b>Surviving Politics and Suicide</b>	<b>Risking Deportation in Activism</b>	<b>All</b>
<b>"New American Girl's"</b>	<b>Shadows as a Location of ID.</b>	<b>Secrecy as Mental Distress</b>	<b>Navigating a One-Sided System</b>	<b>All</b>

After categorizing the films with their most prominent themes and comparing them across the board, it became clear that in analyzing the Identity, Mental Health and Resiliency themes, every film and narrative shared these themes in common. Although each narrative was its own and these themes manifested in their own ways, these themes became clear aspects of the "Undocumented experience", and their fundamental commonalities were shared. The concept of undocumented as a location of identity and emerging was one that was displayed across each film, as the individuals transitioned out of their silence. This social location marked more than simply an issue of physical documentation and rather presents itself in a mental and

psychological way for these individuals; once again revealing the direct relationship between mental health and documentation.

Mental distress because of this social location and the state violence that arises from being undocumented, was another theme all three documentaries shared. It became thoroughly apparent that for these individuals separating their realities and their bodies from politics is not a feasible possibility, when their entire lives and wellbeing are being debated, determined and holistically affected by the decision making of those in political power. In all of the films, the way politics affected each individual was visible. From Lorella fighting for the Dream Act to be able to pursue higher education and Angy too struggling to enter into higher academia due to lack of access to FAFSA, to Cassandra being positively affected by the implementation of DACA and to Moises grappling with the failure of the 2016 Dream Act, policymaking plays a determining factor in their lives of limbo.

As we see these individuals being caught in the center of politics, controversy and the state, two things become visible. Migrant disposability and resiliency. We see migrant disposability as these individuals and the millions like them, are not treated as humans, but rather as numbers, as political pawns and gains. Instead of being able to rely on the state, these young people have to take it upon themselves to reclaim their own narratives, to engage in the emotional and physical labor of advocating for themselves, of arguing for the sake of their lives being deemed worthy. We see them take to the streets, mobilize in grassroots organizing, create dialogue amongst their communities, and find ears willing to listen, microphones willing to let them speak. This is that resiliency these folx have to turn to, under a state that is not willing to protect them or address the ways it has destabilized their home countries. The resiliency the

narratives I analyzed present, further shows the way the state is not holding itself accountable and rather it is these vulnerable and resilient communities being forced to take it upon themselves to hold the state accountable.

Through the documentary analyses I conducted and these thematic findings, it is clear there is a direct correlation in between being undocumented and heightened mental health issues as recent scholars have been beginning to document in literature. My argument that separating one's undocumented status from one's body and reality is not possible for undocumented folx is illuminated through these personal narratives in which the political and legal context the individuals are immersed in directly controls their lived realities and experiences with mental health. That direct relationship which is lacking in the literature of forced migration and its relationship to mental health is made possible through the lens of these documentaries and stories.

### *Towards Feminist Possibilities of Change*

Now understanding the full extent of how migrant disposability has functioned in an international context, how it has affected Undocumented Latin Americans, and how the U.S. has destabilized Latin America through a multitude of powerful institutions, it is clear that for feminist possibilities of change, we must center an anti-colonial and anti-imperial framework. Anti-imperial frameworks reveal the need to end the continued imperial project in Latin America for how it continues to worsen the ongoing migrant crisis. Acknowledging migrant disposability and how Latin Americans are presented as disposable, allows us to see why expanding refugee

status and protections are necessary. It is through the humanization of the narratives and experiences of Latin American forced migrants that we can call urgency to the United States' accountability. For the United States to be held accountable it must interrogate its long-standing history of colonialism and imperialism in Latin America, it must discontinue to engage in this institutional control and violence, it must reform the broken U.S. immigration system and create a viable, accessible pathway to citizenship for the millions of DREAMers and other Undocumented immigrants who reside in the United States, and lastly it must extend this pathway of citizenship and protection to forcibly displaced migrants from Latin America that have not been able to cross borders yet.

Our communities have been silenced and ignored for centuries. We are made disposable through the U.S.' actions. We walk as disposable. Exist as disposable. Breathe as disposable. It's time the unequal world order our ancestors tried to resist too, is resisted once more. And this time with consequences. Restitution.

### *Closing Remarks*

This work is never finished. There is so much more I would have included in this, if the resources were available. An endless collective of truth I could have added. From mami's grandparents to the soles of the millions of feet that have felt the desert on their toes. I end this here, in hopes that my next project will be to create a documentary myself that builds on the archive of what documentaries already exist. I hope this literature and feminist analyses open your mind to histories your tongue has never had the language for. I hope this truth fuels your stomach and calls you to regurgitate your own truth. I hope you are fueled to move towards

a feminist possibility of what our world can look like. One where borders, capitalism, oppression and corruption are not worth more than water, lives, and blood. I hope you can close your eyes and for one second re-envision what an anti-colonial, anti-imperial, anti-Black, anti-racism, and anti-criminalization world would look like. Hold that vision there. Let it rest on your eyelids every time you open your eyes to what is around you and I.

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