MOTHERHOOD DETAINED: A FEMINIST ANALYSIS OF MOTHERING IN U.S. AMERICAN FAMILY DETENTION CENTERS

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ABSTRACT

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The goal of my research project was to document how women in U.S. American detention centers experience motherhood and whether or not their expectations of motherhood are fulfilled as detainees. The primary data source for the project were approximately 35 letters written by mothers held in family detention centers with their children. Non-profit advocacy organizations, such as RAICES and Grassroots Leadership serve as public clearinghouses for these letters, which are smuggled out of detention centers. My feminist methodology included the use of positioning myself as a researcher, self-reflexivity, textual analysis and grounded theory to identify what women feel they should be able to do as mothers and what they are able to do as mothers in the detention center context. I expected that a woman's ability to enact her roles and responsibilities as a mother would be influenced by the ability to communicate with friends and family outside of the detention center, the duration of stay, basic resource allocation within the detention center, and individual interactions with guards. My analysis answers the following questions: (1) What do the narratives written by women and children in family detention centers in South Texas reveal about the experiences of being detained; (2) how do women perform mothering and motherhood within the detention center context; (3) how do women negotiate their identities as undocumented women in spaces where their agency is performed through acts of mothering; and (4) how do women challenge and resist the conditions

they are in and the limitations placed on their agency by for-profit institutions? My work contributes to ongoing discussions in feminist activist anthropology and the anthropology of immigration.

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INTRODUCTION

On September 5, 2015, I attended a conference at Our Lady of the Lake University in San Antonio, Texas. It was organized by the Refugee and Immigrant Center for Education and Legal Services (RAICES). A series of panel discussions compared Japanese internment camps with contemporary family detention centers in an effort to acknowledge structural similarities based on popular notions of immigration and citizenship. Although the conference attempted to promote awareness about family detention, it failed to consider social justice through an ethical domain. A mother, recently released from the Karnes facility in Texas, was expected to share her experiences of motherhood as a detained, undocumented immigrant. The woman, a translator, and the interviewer sat on a stage facing an audience of 50 strangers. The mother endured an extensive interview exposing the horrible conditions within Karnes and the treacherous journey she embarked on with her children as an immigrant from Central America. Although she was crying, she continued her story as the interviewer kept asking questions that demanded an emotional response. Throughout this segment, it became apparent that the audience was profoundly moved by the revelation of her struggles, but I questioned the method and methodology. How could one mother represent all mothers' experiences? Why was she expected to reveal her story in front of a large audience of strangers? Her vulnerability and that of the subject matter were disregarded.

RAICES' approach to raising awareness made me question advocacy efforts that fail to challenge anti-immigration rhetoric that treats undocumented immigrants as a homogenous Other. Advocacy must occur through an ethical, agentive framework that can identify similar structural constraints on undocumented immigrants' experiences while respecting the vulnerability of their life stories. I left the conference determined to investigate the experience of

motherhood in family detention centers through a research design that highlights the agency and diversity of women's voices.

The goal of this project was to analyze experiences of motherhood and mothering throughout family detention centers in South Texas. My research project also investigated how social advocacy organizations such as RAICES and Grassroots Leadership contribute to the homogenization of immigrant identities, stories, and experiences. The primary data source for this project consists of approximately 30 letters written by women and children held in Texas detention centers. I used textual analysis and grounded theory to identify how women experience motherhood and if they are able to meet their expectations of mothering within the detention center context. I expected that women in family detention centers would be unable to fulfill their standards of mothering due to a lack of access to resources, social networks, and legal representation. I also expected that their experiences of motherhood would be influenced by the duration of their stay and individual interactions with guards.

I placed my analysis within a broader consideration of the structure and function of family detention centers in the United States. Specifically, my project explored the conditions in which immigrants are detained while primarily focusing on immigrant mothers and their children. My work also contributes theoretically to ongoing discussions in activist anthropology, U.S. Third World feminist theory, and the anthropology of immigration. I demonstrate how cultural constructions of undocumented immigrants in the United States significantly influence individual interactions between the guards, women, and children.

BACKGROUND

Family Detentions Centers: What are they, and where are they?

As of January 2015, the National Immigrant Justice Center stated on its website that although the topic of Family Detention has recently made national, state, and local mainstream headlines, the U.S. did not always detain families ("Background on Family Detention"). The U.S. government opened its first family detention center in 2001 with the Berks facility in Leesport, Pennsylvania, but historically, families have not been detained on a large scale (NIJC 2015). However, Japanese American interment camps certainly reveal the practice of detaining families in the U.S.

The Department of Homeland Security managed a 600-bed family detention facility in Hutto, Texas, from 2006 to 2009 which was operated by Corrections Corporation of America (CCA), a private prison corporation that currently manages 60% of immigration detention beds (NIJC 2015). However, DHS closed down the facility in 2009 after significant advocacy efforts by NGOs reported human rights abuse, specifically towards children detained at the Hutto facility. Although the Obama administration stated that additional family detention centers would not be created, there was a dramatic increase in family detention beds during 2014 (Grassroots Leadership 2015). The significant increase in family detention facilities parallels the detention of families in Japanese internment camps during World War II (NIJC 2015).

The Detention Watch Network (DWN), on July 15, 2014, stated that when the Hutto facility opened in 2006, Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) ensured that the center was readily prepared to house detained families (DWN 2014). Immediately after its opening, a report indicated that "children as young as eight months wore prison uniforms and jumpsuits, lived and slept in locked prison cells with open-air toilets, families were subject to highly

restricted movement and threatened with family separation if children cried or played too loudly" (DWN 2014). According to Detention Watch Network, medical treatment failed to meet the needs of detained families and several reports indicated infants undergoing dramatic weight loss due to inadequate nutrition (2014).

As of November 12, 2015, the American Civil Liberties Union—a nonpartisan, non-profit organization, whose mission is "to defend and preserve the individual rights and liberties guaranteed by the Constitution and laws of the United States" states that although significant advocacy efforts by NGOs helped eliminate the use of the Hutto facility to detain families, ten lawsuits presented on March 6, 2007, by the national American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), the ACLU of Texas, and the University of Texas School of Law Immigration Clinic in Austin, Texas, reinforced advocacy efforts that challenged the federal government's policy of detaining families and maintaining the T. Don Hutto facility (ACLU "Case Summary").

The ACLU's court cases consisted of ten plaintiffs, children whose ages ranged from three to sixteen and are from Lithuania, Canada, Haiti, Guyana, Somalia, and Honduras (ACLU "Case Summary"). According to the ACLU, one of the plaintiffs is a 13-year-old girl who had been detained at the Hutto facility for 176 days. The defendants of the court case were Michael Chertoff, Secretary of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, in addition to six officials from ICE who have illegally detained approximately 200 children at the Hutto facility (ACLU "Case Summary"). A Congressional directive hearing to the Department of Homeland Security determined that DHS was expected to keep immigrant families together and the options that were presented to DHS were to release detained families or to use an alternative detention method (ACLU "Case Summary"). However, after the Hutto facility stopped family detention within

their complex, additional family detention centers emerged such as the Artesia facility in New Mexico, and the recent expansion of the South Texas Residential Center in Dilley, Texas.

One of the challenges in explaining the current situation of family detention is that family detention is highly politicized and little researched because of access issues. As a result, there are different assertions made about the status of (DWN) represents a national community of organizations and individuals that seek to reveal and protest the injustices of the U.S. immigration detention and deportation system. The DWN defines "family detention" as "the increasingly alarming practice of detaining immigrant families, including babies and children, with their parents in detention centers" (DWN 2014). The DWN argues that the practice of family detention has recently emerged as new developments in immigration policy encourage the detention and retention of families in detention centers.

In contrast, federal resources provide little information about life inside the detention centers and focus, instead, on the number and location of all detention centers. As of September 12, 2015, the United States Immigration and Customs Enforcement ("ICE") has an online database that allows users to navigate through virtual geographic locations in order to determine the number of detention facilities operating across the nation; the website describes it as a "detention facility locator." According to this information, a total of 81 detention centers exist throughout the nation, which include three facilities in California, one facility in Washington, 11 in Arizona, four in Colorado, 11 in Texas, one in Oklahoman, 14 combined facilities throughout Mississippi and Alabama, 15 combined facilities in Illinois and Indiana, 19 in New Jersey and surrounding areas, and three in Florida. Detention centers can be for-profit or owned by the government.

Even the number of detention centers is controversial. Advocacy organizations include any facility whose purpose includes detaining immigrants as a detention facility. An informational report published by Detention Watch Network and accessed through the Grassroots Leadership online database on September 12, 2105 states that Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), along with the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) operate a developing structure of over 250 immigration detention facilities (DWN 2014). However, as mentioned previously, ICE's website only accounts for 81 of these facilities. In order to understand the scope and experience of detained immigrants and to ensure any standardization of treatment, all must be included in the count.

Advocacy organizations are also the only easily accessible resources for detailed information about detention centers, such as numbers of beds. The National Immigrant Justice Center's (NIJC) "Background on Family Detention" presents a brief historical overview of the creation and maintenance of family detention centers in the U.S. The Heartland Alliance's NIJC, according to their website accessed on November 3, 2015, is an organization "dedicated to ensuring human rights protections and access to justice for all immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers." According to the NIJC, the Department of Homeland Security's affiliated agency, ICE currently operates three family detention centers (NIJC 2015). The 96-bed Berks Family Residential Center located in Leesport, Pennsylvania, opened in March of 2001 (NIJC 2015). The 532-bed Karnes Family Residential Center in Karnes City, Texas, opened in August of 2001, and the 2,400-bed South Texas Family Residential Center in Dilley, Texas, opened in December of 2014 (NIJC 2015). In addition, ICE also operated the 512-bed T. Don Hutto Correction Center in Taylor, Texas, as a family detention center from 2006 to 2009 (DWN

2014). Although the T. Don Hutto Correction Center does not operate as a family detention center anymore, it continues to house women ages. [1]

Public statements about detention centers and government action within them can also be at odds. In 2009, the Obama Administration determined that families detained at the T. Don Hutto detention center would no longer be detained and that additional family detention centers would not be created (Grassroots Leadership 2015). However, DWN states, "With the increase of children and families migrating to the U.S. from Central America this year, the Administration quickly opened a nearly 700-bed family detention facility in Artesia, New Mexico, on the grounds of a Border Patrol training facility" (2014). ICE temporarily operated the 672-bed Artesia Family Residential Center from June 27th to December 18, 2014 until the South Texas Family Residential Center in Dilley, Texas, opened in December of 2014 (NIJC 2015). According to NIJC, the average age of children detained at Artesia was six years old (2015). Moreover, NIJC states that almost all of the family detention center facilities house mothers with children under the age of 18 (2015). However, the Berks facility in Pennsylvania has provided space available to fathers that are detained with their children (2015).

ICE created family detention standards that are presented as "Family Residential Standards" (2007). As of November 12, 2015, the "Family Residential Standards" are readily available on their government website (2007). The family detention standards include seven main sections that refer to the safety, security, order, care, activity, justice, and administration and management standards of family detention facilities (2007). Each main section consists of further detailed descriptions that include but are not limited to emergency plans, environmental health and safety, admission and release, contraband, sexual abuse and assault prevention, discipline and behavior management, food service, correspondence, and educational policy

(2007). However, the standards presented on ICE's government website do not have a legal basis, therefore, such standards remain unregulated with minimal government oversight (DWN 2014).

Family Detention Centers: Who is detained in them?

Customs and Border Protection (CBP) takes families and/or children into custody where they are re-located to CBP holding cells (DWN 2014). The U.S. government has made it a federal law that children (ages are not specified) arriving at the border unaccompanied by a parent or guardian—excluding children from Mexico—must be transferred to the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR), within the Department of Health and Human Services (DWN 2014). These children are immediately placed under ICE custody and re-located to family detention facilities (DWN 2014).

The majority of families apprehended by Customs and Border Protection are seeking refuge and asylum from violence. Many of the families consist of women accompanied by their young children who are often infants and toddlers (DWN 2014). Family detention is not limited to families detained at the border; it also includes families detained throughout the U.S. Currently, there do not exist codified regulations that determine who is apprehended by ICE. Because of the lack of government regulation, ICE is allowed to detain families with mentally ill individuals, pregnant women, and the elderly (DWN 2014). Although ICE regulates all currently operating family detention centers, most of the beds are handled by private prison corporations (NIJC 2015). ICE manages the Berks and Artesia facilities while the Karnes and Dilley facilities are operated by private corporations such as the GEO Group and Corrections Corporation of America (CCA) (NIJC 2015).

Family Detention Centers: What is life like inside of them?

The Department of Homeland Security is legally required to place families accompanied with children in minimally restrictive spaces. In 1996, a settlement in *Flores v. Meese* presented a policy for all children under the age of 18 in government custody (DWN 2014). According to the *Flores* settlement the government is required to "release a minor in custody without unnecessary delay" (DWN 2014). The *Flores* settlement, the ACLU's court cases, and several legal proceedings have determined that it is imperative for the U.S. government to "actively and continuously seek the release of each child in custody" from the detention centers they are being detained (DWN 2014). In addition, it is important to acknowledge that is imperative that children be released to family members or adequate social systems that nurture and benefit the child.

There is no research yet about what life is like inside family detention centers for mothers. There is some research about life inside detention centers for adults, and this research offers us some limited direction in understanding family detention centers. In a two-year review titled "Jails and Jumpsuits: Transforming the U.S. Immigration Detention System" published by the Human Rights First organization, several studies were conducted by the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, New York University's Bellevue Program for Survivors of Torture, and Physicians for Human Rights that demonstrate the hazards detained immigrants are exposed to and how such structures present significant detrimental consequences to their psychological health (2011). These studies have demonstrated that detention reinforces the detrimental effects of continued isolation, depression, and mental health ailments associated with previous trauma (DWN 2014).

Despite these negative effects, government agencies such as the Department of Homeland Security and U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement continuously refer to family detention

centers as family "residential" centers. As it has become evident in the process of my research, terminology often reflects the ways in which institutional structures seek to control the production of information and accessibility regarding family detention. In the "Family Residential Standards" discussed above, ICE continuously refers to detained individuals as "residents" or "illegals" thus suggesting a innocuous mission through the detention centers. The term "resident" refers to an individual who maintains or inhabits a specific space or location. However, the term "resident" does not speak to the complexities of the detained immigrant experience, particularly that of mothers who are negotiating multiple responsibilities, and how such structures dictate the conditions of immigrant families in detention centers. The term "illegal" is placed in a context of disapproval towards the immigrant body. In this case, the notion of illegality is presented as a negative identity form that needs to be controlled and monitored by external institutional agencies such as ICE and guards facilitating the laws and regulations of family dentition centers.

LITERATURE REVIEW

My project is positioned within activist and feminist anthropologies, the anthropology of mothering, immigration discourse and U.S. Third World feminist theories. The Combahee River Collective writes about the "simultaneity of oppressions" experienced through intersections of racism, sexism, capitalism and imperialism (1977). In Laura Perez's response to Enrique Dussel she clearly defines U.S. Third World feminism as

> …a decolonizing politic [that] must introduce, engage, and circulate previously unseen marginalized and stigmatized notions of "spirituality," "philosophy," "gender," "sexuality," "art," or any other category of knowledge and existence. As it simultaneously advances political, economic, social and cultural struggles for greater democracy, I would also also geared that a decolonizing politics resides in an embodied practice rooted in lived and liveable worldviews or philosophies and is therefore in

> decolonizing relationship to our own bodies and to each other as well as to their natural world. It is therefore evident in our thought, scholarship, and interactions with each other, and it is critical and transformative not only of the racialization, ethnocentrism, and classism of Eurocentric capitalist and imperialist cultures, but also of patriarchal heteronormativity as central highly normalized forms of domination that historically precede these and fundamentally structure the logic of colonization and its aftermath up to the present. (Perez 2010).

It is important to note that my research is positioned beyond what is commonly understood as intersectional feminism because intersectional feminism has been co-opted by mainstream feminism. This term points more directly to the roots of Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality (1989).

My interdisciplinary approach is also embedded in anthropology, where there exists a critical relationship between theory and action, one that is often grounded in a commitment to social justice. Rather than attempting to present an objective stance on a specific social justice issue, activist anthropology necessitates a reflexive understanding of the political biases and social factors that influence a research project (Craven & Davis eds. 2013). My research question is developed as part of a social commitment to reveal the conditions of family detention centers and the structural factors that maintain the system of family detention throughout the U.S.

U.S. Third World feminist theories are also explaining how the personal is political and such theories are often applied throughout interdisciplinary fields. An example of activist anthropology that utilizes U.S. Third World feminism is the work of Daniel Goldstein (2014). Goldstein discusses the parameters of activist anthropology after his participation in a protest against family detention and deportation in Elizabeth, New Jersey by stating:

> While doing ethnography I have also done activist work, usually consisting of such mundane tasks as driving injured workers to physical therapy and helping immigrants to initiate legal complaints. In December of 2013, however, I joined a group in a civil disobedience action to protest the detention and deportation of the undocumented. We planned to get arrested and, by doing so, to publicize the injustices of the deportation regime. My motivations for joining this action were complex and included both research

> goals (getting arrested seemed a great way to learn about the situation) and personal beliefs (a deep anger over the impacts of deportation and a desire to doing something about it). In my ordinary consciousness, the personal and the professional were inseparable (Goldstein 2014).

Goldstein's political commitment reflects my own understanding of activism and the importance of bridging the gap between social justice and anthropological research throughout this project. As a researcher on family detention, it has become imperative to present a research question and design that seeks to evoke change in immigration rhetoric and discourse as its primary goal. In order to present an analysis that remains true to social justice activism, I provide an agentive framework through the experiences and voices of women detained in the Dilley, Hutto, and Karnes facilities in Texas. To remain true to the spirit of activist anthropology that situates the personal as political and as professional, as Goldstein notes, I reflect on the personal layers of my life that have contributed to this research design while demonstrating an awareness of the privileged context in which I choose to perform this research.

In Cherrie Moraga's "Theory in the Flesh" she discusses how theories by U.S. Third World feminist in *This bridge called my back: writings by radical women of color* carried "explanatory power" that bridged the personal with the political (2010). Personal stories can reveal the intricacies of power dynamics, which is why Daniel Goldstein applies a similar framework in his description of activist anthropology.

Feminist activist anthropology connects praxis and activism by incorporating a methodology that takes into account the multivalent experiences of the ethnographer within the context of her research. In *Feminist Activist Ethnography Counterpoints to Neoliberalism in North America* (Craven & Davis eds. 2013) Faye Harrison questions in "Navigating Feminist Activist Ethnography" (2013:x-xi) whether feminist activist ethnography can exist. In the context of social movements, Harrison suggests that feminist activist ethnography positions itself in a

time when experiences of disparity are embodied through interlocking systems of race, class, gender, and sexuality. Feminist ethnography presents a multi-method approach towards social justice that incorporates situated knowledge in order to ensure the voices of individuals are conveyed in ways that quantitative methodologies cannot account for (Harrison 2013: xi).

Dána-Ain Davis in "What Is a Feminist Activist Ethnographer To Do?" discusses the manner in which feminist activist ethnographers collaboratively position their work within various communities and organizations whose social justice platforms convey a commitment to a myriad of social issues (2014). The relationship between politics and practice is embodied through a theoretical methodology that concerns itself with a commitment to social justice (Davis 2014). Davis explores the realms of feminist activist ethnography while "collecting the narratives of battered women on welfare in a neoliberal context" in an attempt "to explore the relationships developed with women while they lived in and outside of a battered women's shelter" (2014). Her work demonstrates how individual life stories can be positioned to create change within greater social issues; a task I seek to perform with my own research by analyzing letters written by women detained in family detention centers throughout South Texas. Davis' work embodies feminist activist ethnography while challenging the circumstances in which individual stories can be utilized to create greater social change:

> As uncomfortable as it may be not to sanitize the retelling of people's experiences, a politics of radical empathy depends on discomfort. It depends on forcing people to understand the experiences of someone different from themselves by detailing the horrors so vividly that walls of indifference begin to crumble (2014).

The methodology of feminist activist anthropology commits to revealing situated experiences that show how greater, structural forces contribute to the oppression of a community of people. In the case of my project, the experiences of women detained in family detention centers demonstrate the institutional mechanisms that attempt to disregard detained women's agentive

operations. Through an analysis of the letters written by women in family detention centers, I demonstrate the coercive forces that maintain family detention and how women frame their experiences as mothers within the detention center context.

My research design primarily investigates the experiences of motherhood and mothering within the family detention context. In order to perform such an investigation, I present an anthropological framework that refuses the universal understanding of mothering. Instead of defining mothering or the act of mothering as a universally constructed classification or experience, I reveal my own understanding of mothering through the letters of immigrant women situated within the family detention context.

One of the challenges of attempting to define mothering is its tendency to "be understood separately as both a sexual-biological process and a gendered social engagement" (Walks and McPherson 2011:3). A biological framework understands mothering as a process attributed to unique experiences of pregnancy, birth, and breastfeeding. However, to define the act of mothering solely on the basis of biology denies the importance of understanding motherhood outside binary frameworks that position mothers as care takers and providers. The act of mothering and motherhood is performed throughout a spectrum of social and mundane tasks such as being responsible for children's nutrition, health, education, spiritual development, and language proficiency in addition to providing discipline and nurturing (Walks and McPhersons 2011:4). The way in which mothers choose to engage in these social tasks depends on the context in which mothers experience motherhood and the act of mothering. The notion that specific expectations are necessary to fulfill the definition of mothering is considered part of a Western ethnocentric framework (Walks and McPhersons 2011:4).

My research design focuses on the experiences of women detained in family detention centers in an attempt to demonstrate the various ways in which women participate and define the act of mothering. Each of the letters written by detained immigrant women will provide different perspectives about mothering that deny a universally constructed definition and experience of motherhood. Instead, my work analyzes the ways in which detained immigrant women differently embody and perform mothering throughout the detention center context. The different experiences of motherhood and mothering discussed throughout my research contribute to a broader awareness of the diversity of mothering; specifically, the diverse experiences of mothering within marginalized communities such as immigrant women detained in family detention centers. The letters of detained immigrant mothers also challenge government policies on immigration and family detention that play pivotal roles in how detained immigrant women experience mothering within the detention center context.

In "Birthright justice: the attack on birthright citizenship and immigrant women of color" Allison Hartry discusses how anti-immigrant sentiment in the United States emphasizes the importance of limiting women of color's access to reproductive justice (2012). Moreover, Hartry's article explores "the history of exclusion inherent in this country's immigration laws and the modern political assault of birthright citizenship, both of which are grounded in nativism, sexism, and racism" (Hartry 2012). Hartry's research design presents the experiences of individual women to reveal the conditions in immigration detention centers and how government agencies such as ICE specifically target pregnant women for removal in order to deny immigrant women the ability to give birth in the United States (Hartry 2012).

In addition, Hartry's article analyzes the experience of Zhen Xing Jiang, an undocumented woman from China who was aggressively apprehended by ICE officers while she

was thirteen weeks pregnant with twins (2012). Hartry states that Ms. Jiang's husband questioned why immigration officials were so determined to deport a pregnant woman (2012). Hartry's central argument suggests that:

> ICE's approach toward pregnant women has its foundation in general anti-immigrant sentiment, but that sentiment is particularly focused on women of color and, even more specifically, intertwined with their reproductive capacity. National identity is often expressed in terms of gender and sexuality—as well as race and ethnicity…Noncitizens are constructed as the ultimate outsiders in American society, and immigrant women's ability to reproduce these outsiders is particularly threatening… (Hartry 2012)

Immigrant women of color are subjected to forces that monitor their reproductive agency. ICE ensures that the potential for individual immigrant women to birth noncitizen babies must be eradicated. Hartry argues that such efforts reveal ICE's "conservative goal of ending the right to birthright citizenship for the children of these immigrants" (Hartry 2012). Considering the maintenance of family detention throughout the United States, Hartry's argument raises further inquiries about the ways in which government agencies seek to regulate the bodies of immigrant women detained in family detention centers and moreover, how their bodies are regulated to potentially eradicate their reproductive agency.

My research design attempts to incorporate a multi-axis framework (Crenshaw 1989) that reveals how detained women experience motherhood within family detention centers in relation to a lack of access to social networks and legal representation. According to Crenshaw (1989), a researcher who engages feminist theory cannot "ignore the intersectional experiences of those whom the movement claim as their respective constituents." My research will consistently reference the ways in which detained immigrant women's subjectivity and identity formation are shaped by forces of oppression that shape their everyday lives.

My research is thus also positioned within U.S. Third World feminist theories of intersectionality. Specifically, my work explores the intersectional subjectivities of immigrant

women detained in family detention centers in an effort to demonstrate the structural forces that regulate immigrant women's reproductive agency. I expect that their legal status, gender, public reproductive role as mothers, socioeconomic status, ethnicity and nationality will influence their experiences as mothers in detention centers. However, I will also look for other axes of inequality that the women themselves identify as important to their experiences.

In "Queering the Borderlands: The Challenges of Excavating the Invisible and Unheard" (2003:123), Emma Pérez proposes the use of a "decolonial imaginary" in an effort to trouble the unmarked categories of academic analysis. To perform such a task "we must cover the voices from the past that honor multiple experiences, instead of falling prey to that which is easy—allowing the white heteronormative gaze to reconstruct and interpret our past" (Pérez 2003:123). Through my use of a "decolonial imaginary" I incorporate an agentive framework that allows immigrant women's voices to be heard, specifically through an analysis that investigates the relationships that women choose to engage within family detention centers such as relationships with other women in the detention facility, guards and officers, children, and social advocacy representatives from organizations such as RAICES and Grassroots Leadership. Through my research, I seek to implement "the queer-of-color-gaze" a "gaze that sees, acts, reinterprets, and mocks all at once in order to survive and to reconstitute a world where s/he is not seen by the white colonial heteronormative mind" (Pérez 2003:124). Within my research, I develop this gaze, presenting the experiences of mothering and motherhood through the voices of immigrant women detained in family detention centers by emphasizing how these voices have been rendered silent by "the white colonial heteronormative mind" (Perez 2001: 124).

As discussed in "Queering the Borderlands: The Challenges of Excavating the Invisible and Unheard," Pérez draws attention to the increase in anti-immigrant sentiment that emerged as

> the borders in Texas, California, Arizona, and New Mexico were pushed against by too many Mexicans crossing the Rio Bravo, trekking back and forth through land they had crossed for centuries and paying little attention to anything but rising river banks, the borders became more and more closed and only opened up when a labor shortage demanded cheap laborers. Meanwhile, a brown race was legislated against from fear that it could potentially infect the purportedly pure, white race in the United States.(2003:126)

Although my research specifically addresses the experiences of detained women in family detention centers, I also incorporate an analysis that critically engages how a "brown race" is feared. Individuals who embody a "brown race" are subjected to institutional detainment and anti-immigrant sentiment and policies that maintain the system of family detention.

METHODS

My methodology stems directly from anthropology and Third World feminism. I take a reflexive, discursive approach to the analysis of detainees' letters. My thematic analysis consists of hand-coding for various themes and sub-themes that emerge from the voices of the detainees themselves. Although this research is inclusive of various detention centers, I specifically focus on Dilley and Karnes, Texas, because the letters I have access to are written by women and children detained within these facilities. The letters are smuggled out and uploaded to an online website advocating for awareness about family detention. As of November 12, 2015, the "End Family Detention" website contained 40 letters, but I chose to use 32 letters (I chose not two incorporate the letters that did not have the English or the original copy of the hand-written letter) for the duration of my research project to reveal the various themes that detained immigrant women attribute to their experiences while they are detained in family detention centers throughout South Texas. I expected women would not be able to meet their expectations of mothering and motherhood due to a lack of access to resources and agency essential to their understandings of motherhood. Specifically, I expected that a woman's ability to enact her roles

and responsibilities as a mother would be influenced by the ability to communicate with friends and family outside of the detention center, the duration of stay, basic resource allocation within the detention center, and individual interactions with guards.

I use discourse analysis and grounded theory to analyze the detainees' letters (Farnell and Graham 1998:411). Through this methodology, researchers focus on how individuals utilize language throughout social contexts. "Naturally occurring discourse" is defined as language that emerges out of naturally, flowing "utterances that occur in the context of social interaction, in contrast to utterances specifically elicited by a linguist or ethnographer" (Farnell and Graham 1998:411). The letters may or may not be naturally occurring discourse; it is unknown if the letters were solicited by non-profit organization such as RAICES and Grassroots Leadership. It is necessary to consider the power dynamics embedded throughout the relationships between detained immigrant women and non-profit social advocacy organizations.

I use grounded theory throughout my analysis of the letters in an effort to discover the different variables that speak to the detained immigrant women's experiences. The variables I looked for include: basic resource allocation, social networks, legal representation, individual interactions with guards and the expectations of mothering and motherhood. As discussed in *Handbook of Methods in Cultural Anthropology* (Bernard 1998:607-608), grounded theory specifically incorporates a methodology that allows the researcher to gain an intimate understanding of the informants experiences through "a set of techniques that (1) brings the researcher close to informant's experiences; (2) provides rigorous and detailed method for identifying categories and concepts that emerge from text; and (3) helps the researcher link the concepts into substantive and formal theories."

The first step in my analysis was to identify themes used by the informants themselves (Bernard 1998:608). Through a consistent and careful reading and re-reading of the letters, I was able to derive various "themes" and "sub-themes" utilized by the informants themselves. I determine "how themes are linked to each other in a theoretical model" (Bernard 1998:609). Throughout the process of reading the letters in search of themes, I consistently took notes in an effort to develop a theoretical framework in preparation for the primary analysis. The annotated notes I engaged in allowed the possibility of transforming such thoughts into an explanatory framework from the perspectives of the women themselves (Bernard 1998:609).

I also incorporated an intentional, subjective, analytical lens based on my own experiences as an undocumented immigrant who grew up in South Texas. I recognize that in comparison to the detained mothers, I have a privileged positionality. I am English-speaking and light-skinned; I have temporary protected status through the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals. Nevertheless, my own understanding of family detention is framed through my experiences as an undocumented immigrant. I have developed a sense of intuitive knowing, an embodied sense of being, something I describe through Gloria Anzaldúa's "facultad."

> *La facultad* is the capacity to see in surface phenomena the meaning of deeper realities, to see the deep structure below the surface. It is an instant "sensing," a quick perception arrived at without conscious reasoning. It is an acute awareness mediated by the part of the psyche that does not speak, that communicates in images and symbols which are the faces of feelings, that is, behind which feelings reside/hide. The one possessing this sensitivity is excruciatingly alive to the world (Anzaldúa 2007: 60).

I use Anzaldúa's *facultad* as a methodological tactic throughout the duration of my research, specifically when I engaged in participant-observation to demonstrate how grassroots organizations such as RAICES and Grassroots Leadership homogenize immigrant women's experiences and life stories. I incorporate a position that centers *la facultad* and how it has

allowed me to understand family detention and the experience of motherhood and mothering within family detention centers.

I base my reflexive approach on Lorde's work (2007). In "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," Audre Lorde refers to a different form of consciousness as the erotic, "a source within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed and unrecognized feeling" (Lorde 2007:53). In "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," Lorde discusses how we have neglected the erotic within us, an innate and unique way of knowing and understanding to the world around us (Lorde 2007:53). Through the erotic we are able to discover the parts within us that we have been taught to ignore for far too long (Lorde 2007:53). Lorde continues by stating the power within our ability to acknowledge the erotic that resides in us;

> In order to perpetuate itself, every oppression must corrupt or distort those various sources of power within the culture of the oppressed that can provide energy for change. For women, this has meant a suppression of the erotic as a considered source of power and information within our lives. We have been taught to suspect this resource, vilified, abused, and devalued within western society. On the one hand, the superficially erotic has been encouraged as a sign of female inferiority; on the other hand, women have been made to suffer and feel both contemptible and suspect by virtue of its existence. (Lorde 2007:53)

The erotic allows us to consciously explore those areas within us that shape our world view. According to Lorde, the erotic has the ability to create social connections through the "sharing of joy, whether physical, emotional, psychic, or intellectual" the erotic presents the potential to form "a bridge between the sharers which can be the basis for understanding much of what is not shared between them, and lessens their threat of difference" (Lorde 2007:56).

Anzaldúa' s *facultad* is utilized as my primary methodological tactic in which I reflexively engaged in understanding the experiences of motherhood within family detention centers and the manner in which social advocacy organizations contribute to the creation of

immigrants as a homogenous Other. Moreover, my "consciousness" is situated as a mechanism to reveal the experiences of motherhood according to the voices of immigrant women whose agency is consistently negotiated within the family detention center context.

RESULTS

Throughout my project, I intended to understand how women in detention centers made sense of and experienced motherhood. Based on the literature review and personal participation in immigrant activist organizations, I expected that the women would reference access to social networks such as friends and family and relationships with other women in the detention facility. I also expected that the women would indicate the importance of having access to networks outside of the detention facility which can include, but are not limited to, the interactions they engage in with legal advocates and their communication with representatives from different NGO's. My understanding of the letters also provoked me to inquire about how the women would refer to their physical location throughout their personal narratives. I predicted that the women would refer to their location in relation to resource allocation (e.g. food and water); attention to health and medical needs; interactions with other people in the facility (e.g. guards, and other women); and their perceptions of the treatment and conditions they are in. As a result, I coded three a priori themes in the letters: social networks; outside networks; and location. Within the theme of "social networks" are the sub-codes: family, children, and friends. The code "outside networks" includes sub-codes such as legal representation, NGO's, and community based organizations. The "location" code includes the sub-codes "guards" and "food." Most importantly, during my reading of the letters, I also allowed for emergent codes, so that the

women's voices and experiences would structure the thematic analysis. The emergent codes include the following: bail/bonds, time, violence, refuge/opportunity, religion, crime/corruption, immigration, poverty, distance/dividing families, health/health care, food, water, language discrimination, financial distress, ICE, relationships with other mothers, emotions, motherhood/mothering, discrimination. A priori and emergent codes grouped into four families that reflect mothering responsibilities: physical health of children, social-emotional health of children, coping strategies within the detention center, and strategies to deal with the fear of deportation. In the remainder of this section, I will discuss how women make sense of the detention experience, first broadly, and then specifically in terms of their roles as mothers.

Making Sense of the Detention Experience: Time, Food, Health, Precarious Legal Standing and Status

Throughout my analysis of the letters, it became apparent that the women and children writing the letters center the concept of time, since most of the letters initially inform the reader of how long the women have been detained—the length of time varies in each letter, some over a year—and how much more time they will be detained. One of the important sub-themes of the variable "time" refers to the women's perceptions of legal proceedings and how certain women are able to navigate the system in order to receive a bail/bond and/or are granted asylum. Many of the women refer to this as *primera vez* or *segunda vez.* When the women describe the concept of *primera vez*, it indicates women who do not have previous deportations; the direct translation meaning "first time." The women who have previous deportations—*segunda vez* ("second time")—often question their situation in comparison to women who do not have previous

deportations. Their narratives express concerns about their ability to be granted asylum or the option for bail.

As I continued to analyze the letters, over time, I began to understand an overarching theme where the women expressed their fear and concerns about having to return to their home countries. Out of the 31 letters, 18 specifically address the importance of finding refuge and/or opportunity once they are able to leave the detention facilities. In one of the letters, a woman whose identity remains anonymous, describes her experiences leaving her home country and her perceptions of the situation upon her arrival to the United States:

> *YO SALI DE MI CASA Y DE MIS PAIS = EL 15 DE NOVIEMBRE PORQUE POR UN PELO ACABABAN LOS MARERO CON MI VIDAD Y LAS DE MIS TRES HIJOS. LLEGUE ALOS ESTADOS UNIDOS ES 4/1/15 PUCHICA ES UNA GROSERIA BUSCO AYUDA UN REFUGIO PARA MI Y MI FAMILIA PERO LO QUE ME DIERON FUE UN CASTIGO ES TRISTE MI VIDA*
>
> *I left my home in my home country = November 15 because the marero almost ended my life and the lives of my three children. I arrived to the United States on 4/1/15 puchica is a bad word I seek help refuge for me and my family but what I was given was a punishment my life is sad (Translation provided on endfamilydetention.com).*

In this narrative, the author describes the importance of finding refuge for her family, but she conveys concerns about her ability to find refuge and questions why she has received such a punishment. Each of letters convey similar concerns with the concept of refuge and seeking opportunity. However, there is heterogeneity in how the the women describe their control and understanding of their status and situation and ability to find the refuge and opportunity they

seek. The women's agency is present as they construct narratives that describes their experiences with detail in order to ascertain their rights and control of the situation they are living through.

The concept of "first/second time" conveys the types of relationships that the women build within their groups. This concept also presents a form of confusion since many of the women expressed their concerns about what their status as "first/second time" would mean in their ability to find asylum and refuge. This was a prevalent theme across several of the letters where women expressed feeling confused about differences in the amount of time each of them were detained.

The physical health of children and their own was mentioned by most of the women throughout several of the letters. Although each letter refers to physical health in different ways, there are also emerging patterns in how the women construct the importance of their children's health and medical needs as well as their own ability to maintain adequate health. Every letter illustrates attention to the limitations and obstacles the women are presented when their children refuse to eat the food that is provided in the facility or when they are unable to consume the food themselves. Out of the 31 letters, 15 of the letters mention concern with physical health in relation to the food that is provided and the health outcomes that arise when the women and children are unable to consume the food. For example, a mother by the name of Rosalinda, who has been detained for 6 months and 24 days with her three children at the point of writing this letter expressed her concerns about the conditions in the facility:

> *Me siento frustrada, desesperada, preocupada, porque tanto tiempo y ahora migracion no quiere dejarnos salir, mis ninos no comen porque la comida es terrible, el agua cuando la tomamos nos duele el estomago y se infla…(A)*

> *I feel frustrated, desperate, worried because, why so much time, and now immigration wont let us out. My children don't eat because the food is terrible, the water when we drink makes our stomachs hurt and get bloated… (Translation donated by Rebecca O. Flores)*

As she expresses her concerns towards her children's health, it becomes apparent that her feelings of frustration, desperation, and worry are tied to her ability to exercise control over the situation she and her children are facing while detained. This narrative also demonstrates the relationship between the food and water that is being consumed and health outcomes such as bloating and stomach pain that are directly correlated to the conditions of the facility. This mother's narrative reveals how motherhood within the detention facility incorporates a framework that challenges the conditions in the facility—specifically, as she critiques the facility's food and water—and how the mother's inability to remove herself and her children from the situation creates feelings of frustration, desperation and worry.

Not only do the women express disapproval towards the food and water that is provided, but some of the children mention similar distaste towards the resources provided in the facility as well. This observation demonstrates that regardless of age or social standing, the individuals detained express similar concerns towards the conditions in the facility. More importantly, the relationship between the mother's and children's narratives allows the researcher to compare the responsibilities that the women identify as important to their identity as mothers and how they negotiate this identity with their ability to provide adequate care for themselves and their children within the detention center context. A personal testimony written by a teenage girl demonstrates how the conditions in a detention facility are perceived by someone who is of a younger age:

...respecto a la comida era orrible nos daban un taquito de tortilla de arina cruda sin sabor y con huevo y el huevo tambien estava crudo sin sabor nos daban una manzana que era lo unico bueno y una cajita de leche bencida toda fea por que algunas tenian semanas de aver bencido una botella de agua pero solo para la comida y si no la tomabamos con la comida ellos pasavan y las decomizoiban y nos llenaban un tambo de agua pero parecia cloro (K)

With regard to the food, it was horrible. They gave us a taquito made of an uncooked flour tortilla without any flavor with egg, and the egg was also uncooked, without flavor. They gave us an apple, which was the only good thing, and a carton of expired milk, really gross, because some had been expired for weeks; a bottle of water, but only with the meal, and if we didn't drink it with our meal, they came by and took them, and filled up a barrel with water, but it seemed like bleach (Translation by Melissa Biggs).

Lily's narrative captures a vivid portrayal of the conditions within the Karnes detention facility. Her description of the food reveals how food and water in the facility are presented as important factors necessary to ensure adequate health. Interestingly, Lily's narrative also demonstrates strong disapproval towards the water that is provided since it is compared to bleach. The concept of water being contaminated with bleach was a reoccurring theme throughout several of the letters where the women and children referenced water in relation to health and basic resource allocation.

In addition to allocation of resources such as food and water, the social-emotional health of children and that of their mother's was a prevalent theme that emerged through several of the letters. As discussed earlier in this section, the primary factor that the women identified as important to attaining adequate social-emotional health was the concept of time and how it

structured their ability to make sense of their situation. In 18 out of 31 letters, the women and children referenced their perceptions of time in relation to refuge and/or opportunity. I came to understand through re-reading the letters that the notion of refuge was oftentimes, attributed to the women's desires to leave their home countries due to inadequate social, and often times, economic living situations. Many of the women expressed their desires for the opportunity to be granted asylum or refuge, so, often, notions of opportunity were expressed in relation to the mother's legal status.

How I came to understand the women's constructions of refuge and opportunity is relevant to the theme that centers the social-emotional health of children because it is important to consider the time and energy that the women and children have already exercised prior to their arrival to the detention facility. In other words, the social-emotional health of the children cannot be considered without acknowledging that the women and children have already endured so much. For example, Olivia describes her situation and pleads for help from the audience:

> *Nosotras necesitamos su ayuda para poder salir de este lugar y estar con nuestros familiares, tambien porque no queremos regresar a nuestro pais porque en nuestro pais hay mucha pobreza, muchas extorciones, delincuencia y no hay muchas oportunidades para conseguir trabajo y habeses ni educacion…*
>
> *We need your help to get out of this place to be with our families. We cannot go to our country because there is poverty, violence, crime and there is no way to get a job or sometimes even education (O) (Translation provided by endfamilydetention.com)*

Olivia's narrative demonstrates that her current social-emotional health is deeply affected by previous memories and experiences prior to her arrival to the Karnes detention facility. Olivia's refusal to return to her home country because of violence, crime and poverty demonstrates that

her ability to make sense of her current situation is influenced by her previous experiences as an immigrant woman.

The social-emotional health of the women and children is also connected to their identities as immigrant women and children and the stress and fear caused by the constant threat of deportation. The women express their fear of deportation because of the possibility of having to return to their home countries if they are not granted asylum or some form of refugee status in the U.S. The threat of deportation is connected to the mother's inability to see their children living outside of the detention facility. The concept of dividing families emerged when I was searching for themes connected to threats of deportation and how this influenced the social-emotional health of the women and children. I came to understand that the threat of deportation played a pivotal role in how the women made sense of their situation. Rose, who has recently learned about her deportation status, expresses her concerns towards what she identifies as unjust treatment and a failure to recognize equal rights among the women who have been deported more than one time:

> *Parece injusto yo le suplique por una fianza y no me la dieron y ahora boy acer derpotada y tengo problemas en mi pais es injusto depues de tanto timepo detenida luchando por quedarme con mis hijas ellas me necesita estan muy pequenas porfabor ayudenos acer algo para estar con nuestros hijos porque es una injusticia lo que estan asiendo.*
>
> *This is unfair, I pleaded for a bond and they did not give it to me and now I am going to be deported and I have problems in my country. It is unjust that after being detained for so long, fighting to stay here with my daughters, they need me, they are very little. Please*

help us do something so we can be with our children because it is an injustice what they are doing. (Translation provided by endfamilydetention.com)

Rose's narrative captures the intersections between mothering, legal status, and how the threat of deportation play a pivotal role in her social-emotional health. Moreover, Rose's separation from her children living outside of the facility causes concern in her life and that of her children's. Rose's narrative demonstrates that her ability to perform mothering is not only influenced by her detained status, but also because Rose is detained, she is forced to negotiate her identity as a mother within and outside of the facility. Her concerns about being able to care for her daughters outside of the facility demonstrate that her ability to perform mothering obviously necessitates her presence in her daughter's lives. Rosa's absence in her family's life, specially in regards to her two daughters, influences her social-emotional health as well as the social-emotional health of her children who are forced to be away from their mother.

Rosa's narrative presents similar patterns that are prevalent among many of the narratives written by the women and children. In 14 out of the 31 letters the women expressed concerns regarding their immigration status and 15 of the letters specifically conveyed concerns and fear of being deported. The prevalence of this theme demonstrates that the women continuously negotiate their identities as mothers in relation to their status as immigrant women who experience the threat and actuality of deportation.

The women identify their mothering responsibilities in regards to ensuring adequate physical and social-emotional health for their children and for themselves. In addition, the women also express their coping strategies within the detention center. The primary coping strategy was I identified was when women's narratives emphasized the importance of having access to health care. Fourteen of the 31 letters written by the women mentioned their

perceptions of their own health, their children's health, and how the conditions in the facility are influencing their overall health. Health care played a pivotal role throughout this theme because most of the women expressed their disapproval towards the health care they were receiving in the facility. Within the theme of health care the following sub-codes emerged: the need for medicine and lack of access to it; perceived illnesses among the women and children as they relate to the conditions within the facility, but also previous illness that have not received proper medical attention; and a few letters mentioned their distrust of and disappointment with the doctors themselves.

Throughout my analysis of the letters, it became apparent that the women's agency is most active in the moments when they are forced to advocate for their own health care needs and that of their children. Many of the women challenge the health care that is provided and the types of medical responses they receive from the health attendants within the facility. For example, Jasmine, a woman whose testimony demonstrates how the health care that is available is perceived, writes:

> *Cuando alguien esta muy enfermo o se siente mal y va al medico solo le dan acetaminofen o si no dicen que tomes suficiente agua pero la mayoria de las veces lo ignoran. Casi todos los bebes se enferman de la gripe o infeccion en la garganta entonces ellos lo unico que dicen esque habran el choro de la ducha con agua caliente y que absorban el vapor del agua (supuestamente es una terapia) pero mas bien puede absorber algun parasito y se pondran aun mas enfermos. Un bebe debe tener 40 de temperature para que le den jarabe o acetaminofen (M)*
>
> *When someone is really sick, or feels bad, and goes to the doctor, they just give you an acetaminophen, or if not that, they tell you to drink enough water, but most of the time,*

they ignore you. Almost all of the babies get sick with colds or infection. Then the only thing they tell you is to run hot water in the shower, and they'll breathe in the steam (supposedly that's a treatment), but its more likely they are taking in a parasite, and get even sicker. A baby has to have a temperature of 104 before they will give you [cough] syrup or acetaminophen (Translation provided by endfamilydetention.com)

In Jasmine's narrative, there are several overlapping themes that are referenced and contribute to how I understand the strategies that the women utilize to cope with their situations in the detention facility context. Jasmine conveys her perceptions on the type of health care that sick individuals receive, and through her narrative, it is apparent that the health care provided to the women in the facility is far from adequate since Jasmine's testimony demonstrates the generic responses the women are receiving such as automatically being prescribed acetaminophen or encouraged to drink plenty of water if they are feeling ill. Jasmine definitively states feeling ignored when advocating for her health care needs, and she is even skeptical of the type of treatments that are recommended by the health attendants in the facility. Jasmine's coping strategies are obvious given that she is challenging the type of medical attention she and the other women receive. Her ability to question the recommended treatments captures the coping mechanisms Jasmine utilizes in order to make sense of her situation.

Another example of coping strategies within the detention center context can be understood when considering how religion plays a role in how the women make sense of their situation. In 8 of the letters, the women and children expressed their concerns towards their current situation and their futures in relation to religious practices and ideals. For example, Dahlia, a woman detained at the Karnes facility states the following:

...ya no aguanto al estar aqui ya me desespere y a la comida no me gusta y ya no quiero estar aqui, mi hijo cumplio el ano aqui me gustaria salir ya yo llevo mucho tiempo quiero que nos ayuden para poder salir [redacted] solo Dios me a dado fuerza para aguanta tanto tiempo...(D)

...I can't stand to be here anymore. I am desperate, I don't like the food anymore, and I don't want to be here. My son's birthday was here. I would like to get out of here. I've been here for a long time. I would like you to help us get out. I pray to God. Only God has given me the strength to bear all of this time here… (Translation by Diana Gomez).

Dahlia's concerns about being detained are understood through her revelations about her son and her concerns about him growing up in a detention facility and having his one-year-old birthday while they are detained at Karnes. Dahlia attributes her strength and ability to endure the conditions within Karnes in relation to God and religious ideals that advocate for prayer. Through religion, Dahlia is able to cope with her situation and through prayer she is able to find strength to withstand the deplorable conditions until her release.

Religion is a predominant theme across several of the letters, however, a few of those letters emphasize religion to a greater extent. Of these letters, the women and children specifically understand their situation through religious ideals and practices. Another example of a narrative that centers religion is a letter by Iris, a teenage girl who writes to a friend she has made at the detention facility, but from whom she will have to be separated from because Iris is being deported. Iris makes sense of her situation and acknowledges her faith when she gives advice to her friend to continue to move forward:

Hola [redacted] preciosa, primero que nada te quiero dar gracias, port tu amistad, apesar que te conoci poco me di cuenta de que eres una gran persona y amiga sabes me

agrada tu manera de ser, te pido un favor, Bueno major dicho te hasle un favor al mundo nunca cambies, poque tu vales mil [redacted] ojala que pronto salgas de aca, tu no te preocupes ni pierdas la fe que Diosito te va a recompensar, siempre oral al senor para que te de fuerzas para continuar adelante…(I)

Hello, my precious [redacted], before anything I want to tell you thank you for your friendship. Even though I didn't know you for very long I realized that you are a great person and friend. I like the way you are and I ask you a favor… well (let me rephrase) do the world a favor and never change because you are worth a thousand. [redacted] I hope that you get out of there soon, don't worry and don't lose faith that God will make it up to you, always pray to Him that He give you strength to continue moving forward. (Translation provided by endfamilydetention.com)

The advice that Iris gives to her new friend demonstrates how her identity is situated within religious ideals and practices that prioritize faith and prayer. Iris continues by suggesting to her friend to persevere and to not give up because God will make it up to her. In this narrative, faith is at the center of Iris' ability to make sense of her situation. Similar to Dahlia's narrative, Iris also positions her strength in her faith. By engaging in prayer, Iris utilizes a coping strategy that can provide a temporary resolution to her current situation. Through religion, several of the women are able to strategize coping mechanisms to overcome their situations and eventually leave the detention center context.

The women also create strategies to negotiate their fears of deportation through two primary methods: advocating for and acquiring access to legal networks; and building relationships with guards and other women. In 12 of the 31 letters, women expressed insecurity towards their immigration case and/or immigration status. Legal representation or the lack of

plays a drastic role in how the women navigate the political and legal systems that keep them detained. Several of the women make sense of their situation by questioning their legal status since many of them are pleading for asylum or some form of refugee protection. An example of advocating for and acquiring access to legal networks can be seen in Lavender's narrative.

> *Me siento muy preocupada porque yo traendo mis pruevas me an negado mi caso no se porque a nosotras de segunda no nos toman en cuenta si tenemos los mismos derechos que todas. Me quieren aser firmar a la fuerza y me dijo el official que si no firmo que me iba a meter a la carcel y me dio la hoja de deportacion y los de asilo me la detuvieron y yo tengo miedo regresar a mi pais porque tengo amenazas de muerte en mi pais y porfavor necesitamos que ustedes nos apoyen. (X)*
>
> I feel very worried because, me, having brought my proof, my case was still denied. I don't know why they don't consider us, the ones from the "second time" because we have the same rights as all the other ones. They want to force me to sign and the officer told me that if I don't sign he is going to put me in jail and he gave me the deportation paper and the asylum people prevented it. I fear going back to my country because in my country I have death threats and please we need your support. (Translation provided by endfamilydetention.com)

Lavender's plea for help and her understanding of her deportation demonstrate how she challenges her status by refusing to sign her deportation papers. Lavender's insecurity towards her case/status causes her to feel worried, but she copes through this situation by challenging the official's efforts to force her to sign her deportation papers. Lavender also challenges her status as "second timer" and why she is being denied rights that other women have access to.

Access to legal representation is an important theme that many of the women referenced in their narratives and personal testimonies. Of the 12 women that expressed insecurity about their case/status, 5 of those women specifically addressed feeling insecure about their legal representation. However, there was one individual, a teenage girl, who conveyed her perceptions about her lawyer in a positive manner which demonstrates the importance of having legal representation in order to make sense of their situation and eventually leave the detention center context. To have legal representation means that women are able to utilize this as a coping strategy which is apparent in Primrose's testimony:

> *Nosotras necesitamos la ayuda de todos ustedes porque ya nos sentimos deprimidas y olvidadas en este lugar aunque nuestra querida abogada hace todo lo humanamente possible nuestro caso es tardado porque mi mama ya ha tenido una deportacion. La comida es horrible y ver como personas estan llegandoles el caso positive nos hace sentir peor. Ayer 10/30/2014 al ver que 38 familias salian de este centro y unas que hasta 3 meses aqui hiban llorando por la decepcion que les ha dado esta pais. Una de mis amigas se fue deportada y eso hace que me sienta muy mal y hoy mucha gente que acaba de entrar aqui y ya an hido a su entrevista y se las han dado positiva. Ya no soportamos mas tiempo aqui…(P)*
>
> We need the help of all of you because we feel depressed and forgotten in this place. Although our beloved lawyer is doing everything humanly possible our case has dragged on because my mother has a deportation. The food is horrible and to see some people come in but get good news has made us feel worse. Yesterday 10/30/14 to see that 38 families were deported from here after month of being here has made us feel deceived. This country has been deceiving. One of my friends was deported and that made me feel

> real bad. There are people that just arrived and have gotten positive news. But we cannot stand it any longer the longer we stay… (Translation provided by endfamilydetention.com)

Primrose's positive portrayal of her lawyer demonstrates how legal representation is an aid that allows certain women to make sense of their situations. Since Primrose is a teenage girl, it is interesting how she conveys her understanding towards the possibility of deportation because of her mother's status. It is apparent that her positive perception towards her lawyer allows Primrose to understand her situation within the detention center context regardless of her young age. Another component to Primrose's testimony is the revelation of her struggle to overcome her sadness due to a friend's recent deportation. Primrose's relationship with her friend created a coping mechanism that allowed her to understand her situation. However, through continuous deportations of families within the facility and insecurity towards her case because of her mother's previous deportation, Primrose conveys an inability to withstand her current situation any longer. Legal representation and relationships with other women in the facility allow Primrose to temporarily cope with the threat of deportation because of her mother's case, but because her lawyers efforts are being exhausted, and her friend has been deported, Primrose once again feels she is unable to cope with her situation in the detention center.

Relationships with other women is a major theme across all of the letters. Although only 5 letters specifically stated engaging in relationships with other women, this theme was present in almost every letter because each time the authors used personal pronouns they were in the collective form, meaning that women referred to themselves by using "*nosotras*" or "*estamos*." This observation reveals that the women are consciously engaging in a collective movement in which they depend on each other to advocate for resources to ensure their children's physical,

social-emotional health as well as their own. This pattern is also present when the women ask the audience for help since, often, they advocate for resources for the collective not just individually. The exception to this pattern was when women identified as "first/second timers." Many of the women stated feeling confused and uncertain about the treatment differences between women who had been deported previously and women who had not. Women that identified as second timers expressed feeling confused about their legal status in comparison to their counterparts who did not have previous deportations. This was apparent in their lack of "collective" personal pronouns when they expressed their feelings towards their legal status. However, I am uncertain how women that identified as first timers made sense of their legal status because in the letters that I analyzed all the women identified as "second timers."

In addition to relationships with other women, relationships with guards were also mentioned throughout a few of the letters. Six of the letters referenced guards specifically and 2 letters referenced ICE officials. I am unsure if these two terms were used interchangeably or if they distinguish different forms of officials, which is why I created a separate code. However, through reading the letters, I came to understand that women describe guards in a variety of ways. For example, Violet, a Brazilian woman detained with her 2-year-old daughter reveals the conditions within Karnes and the type of interactions that take place among the officials and women.

> *...I myself was a victim of one of these officials who promised marriage to me. They take advantage of our fragile states to make promises. One of the residents at this center has left with her daughter's bail because the immigration officials had promised that the children's bail would allow all mother's to leave… (Q—only English translation because Spanish letter is unlegeable?)*

Earlier in the letter, Violet also stated that a woman was raped by a GEO official and is now pregnant, so she compares the other woman's situation to her own in order to make sense of her situation. What is evident in her narrative is that relationships with guards and other women are major factors influencing her ability to perform mothering within the detention center.

How women engage in relationships with guards reveals their ability to perform mothering through coping strategies that allow them to have agency within the detention center context. In addition, how the children perceive the relationships between the guards and their mothers also informs whether or not the mothers are able to perform mothering in the detention center. For example, Camellia's letter is entirely about her observations and experiences engaging in relationships with guards. Camellia identifies as part of the "youth" and I include her entire narrative to encapsulate many of the themes that have been discussed throughout his section.

> *Hay muchas cosas que pasan en este lugar llamado Karnes County Residential Center en este lugar hay muchas cosas buenas y malas.*
>
> *Muchas personas lo llaman un centro de Detencion de immigrantes, pero nosotros lo llamamos: una "Carce."*
>
> *Hay algunos trabajadores de este centro de Detencion que ven mal a los immigrantes nosotras tambien somos seres humanos igual que ellos y tenemos sentimientos.*
>
> *A veces ellos se expresan muy mal con nosotras, no me gust aver como tartan a las madres e hijos, hay algunos trabajadores que solo porque preguntan algo nos ofenden o si pedimos algo nos las niegan o hay algunos de ellos que aves andan enojados porque les paso algo y se las vienen a disquitar con uno.*
>
> *Eh observado que cuando las madres y sus hijos hacen fila para la hora de almuerzo ellas buscan un lugar donde hay sombra, enctonces llega un supervisor de este centro de Detencion y los quita de la sombra para pasarlos al sol y hay madres que estan cargando sus bebes y tienen que soportar lo caliente del sol para poder entrar a comer.*
>
> *Hay una madre con problemas psicologico ellse se golpea contra la pared y cuando ella se siente mal lo que hacen es que se la llevan para el medico y la encierran.*

Hay muchas madres e hijos que tienen 3 meses de estar en este centro de Detencion y no saben nada sobre su caso y las personas nuevas que acaban de llegar a este centro les etan poniendo mas atencion que a las que ya tienen 3 meses y no es justo que los hechen de menos.

Tambien hay madres que le tienen miedo a una senora que pertenece a los trabajadores de este centro de Detencion ya que ella es muy enojada y si las made le piden algo ella les habla muy fuerte y con palabras muy groseras.

Para poder entretenernos y olvidar lo que pasa a nuestro alrededor de nosotras los jovenes lo que hacemos es jugar soccer o Basketball y lo que hacen ellos es quitarnos las pelotas o encerarnos en nuestros cuartos.

Pero asi como hay personas malas hay personas buenas. Uno que otro de los trabajadores son muy Buenos y le hablan muy bien a uno.

Ellos hablan con uno para ver como se sienten y nos dan Buenos consejos y a veces lo hacen sentir muy bien a uno y nos levanta el animo.

Ai algunos que son muy buenos y cuando uno les pide also se lo entregan con amabilidad. Juegan con los ninos y le hablan muy bonito.

No todos son iguales la mayoria son buenos pero la mayoria de otros son malos son como rasistaa y miran de menos a los immigrantes lo que yo quiero que sepan es que nostros somos personas buenas y tenemos corazon y sentimiento. (R)

There are many things that happen in this places called Karnes County Residential Center. There are many good and bad things in this place.

Many people call it a dention center for immigrants, but we call it a jail.

There are some workers at this detention center who think poorly of immigrants. We are also human beings, just as they are, and we have feelings.

Sometimes they speak very badly to us, I don like to see how they treat mothers and children. Some workers insult us just for asking a question, or if ask for something, they refuse, or there are some who are angry about something that happened o them, and the take it out on you.

I have observed that when the mothers and children and lining up for lunch, they look for shade; then a supervisor from this detention center arrives and moves them out of the shade and into the sun. And there are mothers who are carrying their babies, and they have to bear the heat of the sun so they can go in and eat.

There is a mom who has psychological problems. She hits her head against the wall, and when she's feeling bad, what they do is they take her to the doctors and lock her up.

> There are many mothers and children who have been in this detention center for three months, and they still don't know anything about their cases. They are paying more attention to the people who just got to this center that they are to the people who have already been here three months. It isn't fair thy they treat them as inferior.
>
> There are also mothers who are afraid of one of the ladies who works at this detention center, because she is really angry, and if the mothers ask her something, she speaks to them harshly and an in a very vulgar way.
>
> To entertain ourselves and forget what is going on around us, we young people play soccer or basketball, and what they do is take away our balls, or lock us up in our rooms.
>
> But just as there are bad people there are good people. One or another of them is really nice and speaks very nicely to you.
>
> They talk ot you to find out how you feel, and they give you good advice, and sometimes they make you feel really good. And they lift our spirits.
>
> There are some who are very good, and when you ask them for something, they bring it in a friendly way. They play with the children and speak really nicely to them. Not everyone is the same, most are good, but most of the rest are bad, they are racists, and they look down on the immigrants. What I would like them to know is that we are good people, and we have hearts and feelings. (Translation provided by endfamilydetention.com)

Camellia's narrative is important because it references each of the themes hat have been discussed throughout this section. Camellia's young age not only demonstrates how the children might make sense of their situations, but also how children perceive their mother's ability to perform mothering within the detention center context. Camellia also presents a unique perspective for her ability to view certain aspects of the facility in a positive manner. She describes her coping strategies in regards to the relationships she is able to engage in with the other children. Although it is often difficult for Camellia to observe how the women and children are treated, she challenges why the women and children receive such poor treatment. Camellia also references disapproval towards the type of medical attention certain individuals receive. This observation is also apparent when she expresses her concerns for the woman who is being

locked up every time she is feeling bad and starts hurting herself. Throughout Camellias narrative, it becomes apparent that she makes sense of her situation by challenging the conditions within the facility, particularly the type of treatment she and the other women and children receive by the guards and other officials within the facility.

Together, the a priori and emergent codes suggested that women understood their mothering experiences through two primary responsibilities: their own safety and their children's wellbeing. How the children respond to their situation also reveals the relationships between the mother's responsibilities to perform mothering and the children's expectations for their mother's and themselves. Throughout my reading of the letters, I came to recognize that women understand their mothering experiences by advocating for physical and social-emotional health for their children and themselves. I also realized that the women structured their narratives in relation to their ability to cope with the threat of deportation and the conditions within the facility itself. The women and children's coping strategies include but are not limited to: advocating for legal representation and engaging in relationships with guards and other women in the detention facility.

DISCUSSION

Through my analysis of the letters I found that women attempt to cope and understand their situation as detainees in many different ways, emphasizing each woman's agency, notably constrained, and individuality. The letters suggest that women try to cope by continuously asking the following questions: Why am I here in the first place? Why am I still here? And, why are we in these conditions? The women's coping methods are necessary in order for them to understand the detention center context and to satisfy their expectations of leaving the detention facility in a

specific way (several of the mothers refer to their pursuits for asylum). Moreover, their coping strategies reflect how the detained women understand their mothering and whether they are able to perform mothering within the detention center context.

The detained women understand their ability to perform mothering by advocating for their physical health and that of their children. When women discuss access to health care, their narratives challenge prescribed medical treatments that are deemed improper and inadequate. Other women referred to their experiences of undergoing symptoms of various illness; many women described these situations in relation to the conditions in the facility, primarily effects of consuming the food and water that was provided. A vital component to performing mothering is the economic situation in which women advocate for access to childcare and health care options for themselves and their children (Walks 2010: 69). When women talked about their experiences consuming the provided food, women immediately challenged the reasons for the malnourishment that both children and mothers were subjected to. Women also discussed their fears of contamination in the water and this fear was perceived as a direct and intentional threat upon their health and that of their children. Throughout each of the women's narratives, it is apparent that women continuously demonstrated significant concerns about their children's growth and ability to develop socially, emotionally and physically within the detention facility context. The children's narratives also coincide with their mother's concerns and barriers to maintaining physical health for themselves and their children.

The social emotional health of women and children is centered around several factors such as the constant fear of deportation; insecurity about legal status and/or legal representation (including insecurity about access to bail/bonds); separation from family members and friends;

crime and corruption within the facilities; constant financial distress (overpriced commissioner products); and language discrimination between guards and other women.

Relationships with family members within and outside of the detention facilities play a pivotal role in women's abilities to perform mothering since their social emotional health is also linked to access to social networks that grant agency within the detention facility (i.e., access to funds outside of the facility to purchase products and telephone minutes). Many mothers talked about their fears of being separated from their children and other women also talked about their constant frustration and concern for the wellbeing of their children located outside of the facility. Because most women in the facility have limited access to social networks outside of the facility, mothers are unable to maintain constant communication with family members—This was a prevalent theme throughout a few of the letters in which the women talked about monitoring their children's education and well-being outside of the detention facility.

Appropriate behavior is a constant sub-theme among many of the narratives. Testimonies include references to guards that are constantly patrolling the halls and monitoring children to make sure they are not making any noise or playing too loudly. Mothers are forced to ensure that their children follow the facilities' structures and rules since they understand the potential consequences of not abiding by the rules of the family detention system. The guards enforce these rules by presenting attitudes and treatments that many of the women and children define as punishment and torture. Allison Hartry discusses how policies implemented by the immigration system have changed from regulation towards a contemporary approach that emphasizes enforcement, and punishment (2012: 5). Hartry's theory and that of other legal scholars is reaffirmed in my own research study because of the fact that many women referred to the conditions and experienced treatment in relation to prison-like structures that incorporate

punishment and torture into their monitoring mechanisms throughout the detention facility context.

According to the mothers, these components are experienced as both immediate and long term experiences that have present and future consequences. The mother's identify the importance of ensuring they have access to resources in the present moment, but they also acknowledge their efforts to advocate for legal representation that will allow them to leave the detention center context as quickly as possible. The immigration system that dictates their ability to perform mothering throughout various moments is revealed when women express their situations in relation to structures that punish and discipline immigrant bodies. It is also important to note that legal scholars that study "crimmigration" often fail to acknowledge the intersections between crimmigration issues and gender (Hartry 2012: 6). However, in this study I emphasize the voices of immigrant women detained in family detention centers in an effort to reveal the ways in which women's bodies are patrolled by systems of power and individual branches (i.e., guards) that attempt to control the immigrant female body.

U.S. Third World and indigenous feminists talk about imperialism, colonialism, and geopolitical boundary-making being enacted on women of color bodies. In Paula Gunn Allen's *Sacred Hoop* she states the various methods of study she employs to understand American Indian life and thought:

> The methods used in American Indian Studies are various because it is an interdisciplinary field. So while I employ variously the methodologies of anthropology, literary studies, folklore, psychology, sociology, historiography, philosophy, culture studies, and women's studies in theses essays, my method of choice is my own understanding of American Indian life and thought (Gunn Allen 1986: 23).

However, Gunn Allen primarily positions her research through her own understanding of American Indian "life and thought" (1986:23). My research takes on a similar approach given

that I use my own experiences as an undocumented immigrant woman to critically analyze how family detention is positioned within larger, structural systems that oppress immigrant women's bodies.

CONCLUSION

My analysis answers the following questions: (1) What do the narratives written by women and children in family detention centers in South Texas reveal about the experiences of being detained; (2) how do women perform mothering and motherhood within the detention center context; (3) how do women negotiate their identities as undocumented women in spaces where their agency is performed through acts of mothering; and (4) how do women challenge and resist the conditions they are in and the limitations placed on their agency by for-profit institutions? The importance of highlighting women's narratives lies in the fact that in order to understand the experiences of mothering and motherhood within family detention facilities it is crucial to promote and share the lived experiences of women who have been detained in these facilities and who continue to be detained today. Community and social advocacy efforts must promote the awareness of shared and lived experiences, but it is important to do so in a way that respects and understands the vulnerability of the subject matter and the voices conveying narratives of oppression.

When the letters are uploaded to the online website (End Family Detention), viewers are able to have access to the conditions and experiences that detained women are subjected to. By creating an online space that allows viewers to attempt to understand the experiences of undocumented women, more people become educated and motivated to advocate for marginalized communities in the U.S. Each of the 32 letters that I analyzed represent agency and

advocacy in a heterogeneous manner that demonstrates how immigrant woman frame their experiences within the detention center context and how within these spaces they challenge the systems that limit their agency by ensuring that they have access to political and legal representation; social networks within and outside of the facility; and health and health care for themselves and their children (physical and social-emotional health).

Currently, detention facilities continue to detain immigrant men, women, and children. In a recent article published in *UT News* 2015 Shannon Speed describes a protest taking place by women detained in the Hutto detention facility and advocates for political activism that can eradicate the practice of family detention throughout the U.S. As the system of family detention continues to be a controversial topic in mainstream news and scholarly and legal discourse, narratives of immigrant bodies are continuously constructed and re-constructed in ways that often challenge or or reinforce dominant stereotypes about immigrant experiences. By investigating how women understand their abilities to perform mothering within the detention center context, I was able to determine that women advocate for themselves and their children by ensuring they have: access to social and legal networks; access to health and health care; and the ability to eventually leave the detention facility with protective legal status.

In the future, I would expand my research by incorporating participant observation throughout meetings hosted by community and non-government organizations that have access to women detained in family detention centers; produce information about family detention; and lead political activism campaigns in an effort to end family detention. I would also expand my research by performing interviews and volunteering at family detention centers. My current research will contribute to feminist activist anthropology and the anthropology of immigration. In addition, I envision my work contributing to discourse and rhetoric that challenges dominant

narratives about immigrant bodies and fails to acknowledge the oppressive forces that create and maintain the system of family detention in the U.S.

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ENDNOTES

[1] The ages of the women detained at the T. Don Hutto Correction Center vary and I was unable to find a direct source that determined the youngest age of girls detained within this facility.

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Title of thesis: Motherhood Detained: A Feminist Analysis of Mothering in U.S. American Family Detention Centers

Term of submission: Fall 2016

Degree to which thesis applies: BA | BBA

1st Major: Anthropology

1st Minor: Women's Studies

2nd Major:

2nd Minor:

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