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Queer and Trans Migrations: The Impacts of Presidential Discourse

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Queer and Trans Migrations: The Impacts of Presidential Discourse

by

Isabella Richards

A thesis presented to the

Faculty of the Department of
Women's and Gender Studies
Loyola Marymount University

In partial fulfillment of the
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Abstract

Political discourse, defined as “the totality of all speech acts used in political discussions, as well as rules of public policy, sanctified by tradition and proven by experience” (Valerevna and Rakhmatovna 88) has a profound impact on shaping societal perspectives, policies, and cultural norms. In the United States, historical presidential rhetoric has reinforced ideals like the nuclear family, inadvertently promoting heteronormativity and white supremacy. Consequently, this has led to marginalized groups, such as queer and trans migrants, being unjustly portrayed as outsiders or threats. This research project demonstrates how presidential discourse has framed queer and trans migrants as outsiders or invaders spanning from the 1980s to today. By contrasting the words of Reagan, Obama, and Trump I argue that frameworks of race and sexuality, specifically heteronormativity and white supremacy, are deeply interconnected to the immigration process. I explore how despite shifting discourse, queer and trans migrants continue to face mistreatment and exclusion, often catalyzed by presidential rhetoric and the corresponding legislation. While there have been immense shifts in policy and culture, the use of common sense rhetoric remains consistent and unwavering.

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Introduction

The Ongoing Mistreatment of Queer and Trans Migrants

Throughout history, migrants and “foreigners” have been targets of various kinds: as scapegoats for social and economic ills, problems to be maintained and/or expunged, subversives, threats, criminals, and sources of disease.

– Eithne Luibhéid

Immigration is a hotly debated topic within the United States, heavily influenced by political discourse, specifically presidential rhetoric. Political discourse, defined as “the totality of all speech acts used in political discussions, as well as rules of public policy, sanctified by tradition and proven by experience” (Valerevna and Rakhmatovna 88) has a profound impact on shaping societal perspectives, policies, and cultural norms. In the United States, historical presidential rhetoric has reinforced ideals like the nuclear family, inadvertently promoting heteronormativity and white supremacy. Consequently, this has led to marginalized groups, such as queer and trans migrants, being unjustly portrayed as outsiders or threats. This problematic narrative, notably amplified during the AIDS crisis in the 1980s and 1990s, fueled fear and misinformation, resulting in discriminatory legislation that continues to affect immigration processes today. The political discourse of three Presidents: Ronald Reagan, Barack Obama, and Donald Trump, illustrate how discussions surrounding immigration have and continue to be influenced by race and sexuality. Reagan, Obama, and Trump all utilized common sense discourse, rhetoric entrenched in traditions rather than research, to normalize white heterosexual citizens and vilify queer and trans migrants, predominantly from the Global South.

Queer and Trans migrants have been systematically excluded from the United States, while white, gender-conforming migrants have been granted privileges. This exclusion, prompted and upheld by common sense discourse, was especially rampant in the 1980s and 1990s, however, this discourse persisted and continued to be employed by Obama and Trump. While there have been significant shifts in policy and culture the use of common sense rhetoric remains consistent and unwavering. “Common sense” narratives are not typically based on empirical evidence or critical analysis but are instead deeply rooted in societal perceptions, traditions, and experiences (Chávez 89). In the chapter, “National Common Sense and the Ban on HIV-positive migrants,” Karma R. Chávez explains that politicians employed fear rhetoric around the AIDS crisis to exclude immigrants who threatened the prevailing culture of heteronormativity in the United States (70). To justify exclusion and quarantine, many U.S. politicians framed the conversation in an “us versus them” framework. They argued that migrants with AIDS, specifically racialized gay men, and those who engage in homosexual activities are going to harm the public and eventually infect citizens, therefore, we must ban them. While the CDC and other scientific collectives argued that banning, deporting, or isolating HIV-infected individuals would only cause harm, politicians continued to frame this issue as “common sense” which does not have to be backed up by facts and scientific research.

Donald Trump’s strong stance against immigration and the comments made about the morality of migrants shed light on how this population continues to be vilified today through the use of common sense discourse. While Barack Obama’s perceived openness to LGBTQIA+ individuals is celebrated, his legislation reinforced homonormativity and neoliberalism and created a distinction between “good” and “bad” migrants. He exploited Americans’ fear of crime and hatred towards “outsiders” to pass increasingly severe legislation against migrants and

expand the carceral system. Unheard and abused, trans and queer migrants have had to find other avenues through political resistance and shameless interruptions.

Before the 1990s, queer and trans migrants were banned from the United States, therefore, the U.S. government was compelled to create a stereotype or image of a gay or straight individual to determine who was and who wasn't eligible for citizenship. Sara Quiroz, an immigrant from Mexico, was banned from reentry due to her perceived sexuality which was determined based on appearance. In Luibhéid's article, "'Looking like a Lesbian': The Organization of Sexual Monitoring at the United States-Mexican Border," the author provides the story of Quiroz to emphasize the fluidity and often inaccuracy of definitive gender and sexuality labels. While the story of Quiroz took place in the 1960s, twenty to thirty years before the AIDS crisis, this denial of reentry exemplified the inaccuracy and violence the government produces when marking bodies as homosexual or heterosexual. Luibhéid writes, "The importance of appearance is confirmed by testimony that was given to the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) by Quiroz's employer, to the effect that "the respondent usually wore trousers and a shirt when she came to work and that her hair was cut shorter than some women's" (81). The fact that the U.S. government relied on ideas surrounding the appearance of masculinity and femininity to determine an immigrant's sexual identity and therefore access to the United States demonstrates the significance of fitting into gender binaries, ergo adhering to heteronormativity. Quiroz was "dressed as a man," therefore, she was labeled queer.

Heteronormativity, the systematic process of maintaining heterosexuality as the norm, creates a global politics that reproduces heterosexual culture, life, and values. In "The Reaches of Heteronormativity," authors Ward and Schnieder state "the figure of the good heterosexual citizen, but also to its good, gender-conforming homosexual counterpart are woven through

nationalist discourses of family, citizenship, patriotism, and terrorism” (434). Not only are heterosexual individuals privileged, but white, gender-conforming homosexuals are often able to benefit from this system. Homonormativity can be defined as “proliferation of a culturally specific way of being gay that is enough in sync with existing gender, class, racial, and cultural norms as to be considered ‘acceptable’” (O’Brien 794). Homonormativity, which is especially apparent in Obama’s speeches and legislation, allows the United States to appear progressive while continuing to deport, exclude, and detain queer and trans people of color.

Heteronormativity often intersects with other forms of oppression, including racism and nationalism. In the introduction of Jasbir K. Puar’s book, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*, she states, “National recognition and inclusion, here signaled as the annexation of homosexual jargon, is contingent upon the segregation and disqualification of racial and sexual others from the national imaginary” (2). Puar suggests that the recognition and inclusion of the LGBTQIA+ community in national discourse and power structures is conditional upon race and sexuality, therefore racialized queer and trans migrants are excluded from conversations about the social and economic condition of the country. Homonationalism reinforces the importance of the nation, as American exceptionalism is intertwined with every aspect of social and political life. Puar continues to argue that whiteness is not only bound to heterosexuality but instead, heteronormativity, as homosexual populations are able to “participate in the same identitarian and economic hegemonies as those hetero subjects complicit with this ascendancy” (31).

This fear or exclusion of migrants is not only dependent upon ideas surrounding the nation but often coincides with white supremacy and xenophobia. In the article, “Heteronormativity,” Scott Morgenson states, “White supremacy had made heteropatriarchy a

standard for Western civilization: sexual differentiation reflected divine and state power in the white patriarch's possessive rule of colonized lands and peoples, the enslaved, and the nuclear family for profit" (112). In other words, forms of gender and sexuality that did not confine to the colonist idea of heteronormativity were dismantled through violence and oppression during colonization. This is significant because it demonstrates the deeper roots of current societal norms and prejudices, shedding light on how these historical injustices impact gender non-conforming individuals.

Sara Ahmed expands on this definition of heteronormativity, arguing that "compulsory heterosexuality – defined as the accumulative effect of the repetition of the narrative of heterosexuality as an ideal coupling – shapes what it is possible for bodies to do, even if it does not contain what it is possible to be. Bodies take the shape of norms that are repeated over time and with force" (145). In turn, this compulsory heterosexuality that leads to the reproduction of life is intertwined with the reproduction of culture. The imposition of heteronormativity perpetuates a climate that fosters apprehension toward queer and trans migrants. This fear stems from the misconception that their inability to conform to traditional reproductive ideals or raise children who align with these norms poses a perceived threat to the established social order.

In summary, white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, homonormativity, and homonationalism are all deeply intertwined and continue to shape Western civilization. This is significant as it demonstrates where anti-migrant political discourse stems from. Colonist ideas regarding gender and sexuality were born out of violence and oppression. White supremacy and heteropatriarchy maintain and perpetuate a hierarchical order, based on gender, race, and sexual orientation, which places queer and trans migrants at the bottom, facing numerous forms of discrimination and marginalization.

The Unwavering Use of Common Sense Discourse in Presidential Rhetoric

This research project demonstrates how presidential discourse has framed queer and trans migrants as outsiders or invaders spanning from the 1980s to today. By contrasting the words of Reagan, Obama, and Trump, I argue that frameworks of race and sexuality, specifically heteronormativity and white supremacy are deeply interconnected to the immigration process. I explore how despite shifting discourse, this community continues to face mistreatment and exclusion, often catalyzed by presidential rhetoric and the corresponding legislation.

My research differs from current academic studies targeted at understanding the queer or trans migrant experience as it works to unearth the pattern of harmful and discriminatory discourse of the three U.S. Presidents and how this has contributed to the contemporary mistreatment of queer and trans migrants. Queer and trans migrants are more likely to experience abuse and violence in detention centers. While this does not directly relate to the presidential rhetoric surrounding migration, it demonstrates the conditions this rhetoric creates and how widespread abuse is almost always accepted and hidden within ICE (U.S. Immigrations and Customs Enforcement) facilities. In the article, “Treated with neither Respect nor With Dignity” Luibhéid states, “Transgender women are particularly at risk of sexual abuse in detention; it’s estimated that they represent 1 in 500 of all detained migrants, but according to a 2013 report, 1 in 6 substantiated cases of sexual abuse in immigrant detention facilities” (30). Many queer and trans immigrants have died in these detention centers due to inadequate access to health care and exposure to poor living conditions like iceboxes. If able to enter the country, queer and trans migrants face numerous obstacles and often are exploited due to their immigration status. In the book, *Entry Denied*, Eithne Luibhéid states, “Relations of power and inequality at the border cannot be separated from inequitable global relations that structure migration patterns or from

social hierarchies within the United States” (15). In other words, this hierarchy which places cisgender, heterosexual, white men at the top does not dissolve when granted citizenship.

Queer and trans migrants continue to face intersectional oppression and violence due to their identities. Large corporations will often take advantage of and exploit this population for cheap labor. As Luibhéid explains, “When migrants become unable to acquire or retain legal status because of these processes, this does not mean that they are deported. On the contrary, they often become differentially included in the United States in a manner that makes them highly vulnerable and exploitable” (“Treated Neither with Respect nor with Dignity” 26). The United States relies on this undocumented workforce to produce goods, while simultaneously scapegoating them for the poor working conditions and lack of jobs in the country.

Although the 1980s and 1990s witnessed the implementation of some of the most overtly homophobic and panic-driven laws and policies, the United States continues to subject queer and trans migrants to violent and discriminatory detention, deportation, and exclusion. While numerous research studies have focused on the AIDS crisis, the resultant legislation, and the current state of the immigration process, I bridge these studies and put them into a contemporary and meaningful dialogue, with a focus on discourse. Current research determines that queer and trans migrants are vulnerable due to the intersectional oppression they face, therefore, I explore one pathway of this oppression in the U.S., immigration discourse, customs, and legislation. By focusing on a time when it was most visible, the AIDS crisis, I can explain how this built the stage for neoliberalism and homonormativity in later years.

For my research method, I am utilizing political discourse analysis. Political discourse analysis is the study of politically related writing and speeches and often aims to connect discourse with action. I focus on the year 1987 and the addition of AIDS to the dangerous

contagious disease list. I read archival materials from the Miller Center, a “nonpartisan affiliate of the University of Virginia that specializes in presidential scholarship, public policy, and political history” (Miller Center), as they have extensive records of the speeches that U.S. Presidents have made over the years. Specifically, the words of Obama, Trump, and Reagan are utilized as analytical objects.

By utilizing the political discourse of Reagan, I argue that the culture and rhetoric of the 1980s and 90s are significant for contemporary immigration policy and dialogue. More specifically, I argue that immigrants with HIV or AIDS were depicted as invaders, while U.S. citizens who had contracted the disease were simply “victims.” This discourse not only reinforced white supremacy and heteronormativity but also mirrors more contemporary discussions on immigration. This “common sense” rhetoric continues to be the justification for the exclusion and criminalization of migrants, specifically in the context of disease or illness.

For more recent political discourse on trans and queer immigrants, I am utilizing The American Presidency Project which includes numerous speeches, executive orders, interviews, state dinners, etc. made by powerful political figures. These contemporary moments of political discourse, in comparison to past rhetoric, reveal how while culture and policy may have changed over the years, discourse remains stagnant, and what this means for trans and queer migrants. Trans and queer migrants continue to be framed as outsiders or invaders, which the government must exclude or criminalize through means of deportation, detention, and legislation.

Political discourse analysis and archival research are the most appropriate methods for my research as they reveal specific moments of homophobic and racist discourse and how they represent or depict U.S. culture as a whole. Instances of rhetoric that frame queer and trans migrants as outsiders, exhibit how the marginalization and exclusion of this population is

consistent and unwavering over the years, justified through various modes of discourse. This includes common sense discourse, fear rhetoric, and double-speak when a politician deliberately obscures the meaning of words to make them more palatable to the public. While contemporary politicians, with the exception of Trump, are not as apparent about their conception of who and who is not considered American, and therefore worthy of protection, queer and trans migrants continue to be harmed, scapegoated, and banned. This is due to the fact that political discourse has consistently upheld and enforced heteronormativity and white supremacy, perpetuating ongoing and systemic violence and marginalization against queer and trans migrants.

Ronald Reagan and Common Sense Narratives of the 1980s and 1990s

The first chapter, focused on the legislation and discourse of Ronald Reagan delves into the fear, misinformation, and violence of the AIDS crisis, with a specific focus on the 1987 legislation that banned HIV-positive migrants from entering the United States. During the height of the AIDS crisis, the United States reported more cases of AIDS-infected individuals than anywhere else in the world, however, they continued to push rhetoric that immigrants and outsiders were responsible for this crisis (Chávez 68). In 1987, the Immigration and Naturalization Service (IHS) required that all individuals with visible AIDS symptoms be tested and that HIV be added to the dangerous and contagious diseases by Congress (Chávez 69). However, this applied not only to migrants entering the country but those who had already been granted citizenship from 1987 to 1988. Conceivably, an individual who contracted AIDS in the United States could be deported back to their native country after the diagnosis. Again, common sense rhetoric, political discourse that relied on feelings rather than facts, was deployed to scapegoat immigrants for this crisis and exclude migrants. Chávez argues, “National common sense led to the scapegoating and exclusion of migrants and reinforced deeply conservative

views about the importance of rigid national borders and the limits of belonging to a national community” (76). Conservative politicians exploited the fear and confusion surrounding the crisis to blame and deport migrants for their delayed and apathetic reaction to the epidemic.

Barack Obama and Neoliberalism

The second chapter focuses on Barack Obama’s presidency, the dichotomization of migrants into categories of good and bad, and the use of common sense discourse in conjunction with neoliberalism. In the article, “Common-sense Neoliberalism,” Stuart Hall and Alan O’Shea discuss how common sense discourse is not only “invoking popular opinion but shaping and influencing it so they (politicians) can harness it in their favor” (8). When politicians argue that popular opinion already agrees with the statements they are making, the use of statistics or research is typically dismissed, leading to a sort of “self-fulfilling prophecy.” Hall and O’Shea argue that while common sense discourse is typically conservative, it still changes with the cultural and social attitudes of the time. Obama often employed this type of discourse to argue for increased deportation and exclusion for migrants with a criminal record, ignoring the crimes, for example, sex work, stealing to feed oneself, crossing the border illegally, etc that migrants, specifically queer and trans migrants, are forced to commit in order to survive.

Donald Trump and “The Wall”

The third chapter focuses on the discourse of Donald Trump, specifically the comments he made regarding the morality of immigrants, the violence of the border wall, and the impacts of family separation. Trump’s 2016 election campaign exploited migration and the fear of migrants to gain power. Specifically, Trump’s border wall emphasized the physical and social obstacles that migrants have to overcome. Socio-political borders are used to distance migrants from their families and communities. As Sandibel Borges argues, “borders reproduce rigid and

binary categories of gender and sexuality....And they are reproduced by and reproduce the rhetoric of us versus them...where migrants with little or no structural power are constantly constructed as outsiders” (82). Again, the “us versus them” rhetoric is implemented to distance queer and trans migrants from gender-conforming, straight, citizens. The United States government employed this rhetoric to convince Americans that migrants, especially trans and queer migrants, are undeserving of basic services, care, or citizenship. To maintain the current hierarchy, queer and trans migrants are repeatedly othered and framed as “outsiders” or “invaders.”

Chapter 1

Ronald Reagan and Common Sense Narratives of the 1980s and 1990s

I am expected to disregard 12 years of my life, the years forming the bulk of my personal history as an adult. I am expected to give up the health insurance benefits and tax benefits I have paid into for 12 years—and still pay. All this because HIV, which I became infected within the United States, turns me into a threat to my adopted country.

—Press release, ACT UP, San Francisco and Golden Gate, June 17, 1991

(cited in Chávez 66)

The 1980s and 90s were a time of panic-driven and discriminatory laws against trans and queer migrants. Ronald Reagan's use of common sense discourse to justify and defend the exclusion and ban of HIV-positive migrants was dependent upon ideas around American exceptionalism and the protection of the nation's values and culture. This discourse emphasized that White Americans, the “real victims” of this crisis, had to be protected from the “immoral” migrants who spread disease and used social services. However, this presidential rhetoric failed to address U.S. involvement in foreign countries and how AIDS had already plagued the LGBTQIA+ community within the United States. Queer and trans migrants were scapegoated for the spread of this disease, regardless of their citizenship status or where they had been infected. Rather Reagan and his administration took a dichotomous approach of “us versus them” designed to further polarize Americans and shift blame for the epidemic. In this chapter, I will discuss two pieces of legislation passed during Reagan's presidency and three speeches made by Ronald Reagan himself to demonstrate how presidential discourse has real and significant impacts on U.S. culture, ideals, and attitudes surrounding immigration.

During the 1980s, American politicians attempted to slow the growing number of refugees and the increase in illegal immigration. People of color from Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean accounted for a larger number of migrants than Europeans. In the article “Ronald Reagan and The Task Force on Immigration,” Maddux explains that, “by 1981 the Reagan administration had to address the issue of immigration reform as a result of changes linked to the 1965 immigration reforms, most notably the expansion of legal immigration, the intensification of refugee influxes to the United States, and the escalation of illegal immigration” (199). While Reagan was not focused on immigration during his time as a California governor, the increase of non-white migrants and the surrounding fear of this population made it impossible for the Reagan administration to ignore controlling migration and border patrol.

Several factors contributed to the growing concern about non-white migration that eventually forced the Reagan administration to approach immigration and border control. There were demographic shifts in California as there was an increased number of non-white migrants, particularly from Latin American countries. Additionally, the influx of migrants led to economic anxieties about competition for jobs and resources. Finally, there was a rise in anti-immigration sentiment, as individuals perceived the migrant population as depleting resources and leading to rising crime rates. Lastly, discourse surrounding immigration heightened during Reagan’s presidency, due to the large number of non-white migrants, and caused Reagan to focus on illegal immigration and border control (Maddux). In the article, “Treated neither with Respect nor with Dignity”: Contextualizing Queer and Trans Migrant “Illegalization,” Detention, and Deportation,” Eithne Luibhéid writes, “Early-twentieth-century immigration policies and practices steadily codified dual tracks: one for admission and settlement by primary migrants from Northern and Western Europe, structured around a hetero nuclear family with a male

breadwinner; and another track that built on the history of exclusion of Chinese and other Asian migrants while making migrants from Mexico, Central, and South America, and the Caribbean primarily temporary, exploitable labor that could be summoned when needed and then dismissed” (21). The United States relied on migrants from the Global South to uphold the economy, however, “legal” tracks toward citizenship are largely built upon race and sexual orientation.

In summary, political pressures and social anxieties surrounding migration caused the Reagan administration to act. In the article, “The Politics of Immigration Reform in the United States,” Daniel J. Tichenor writes, “Conflict during the 1980s seemed to shift from a question of whether there should be expansive immigration, to a struggle over who should benefit” (345). Politicians began to debate issues surrounding job competition, social services, cultural assimilation, and national identity. In 1986, Reagan signed the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA), which included amnesty for certain undocumented migrants who had been in the United States since 1982, as well as employer sanctions which included penalties for employers who knowingly hired undocumented workers. However, the emergence of the AIDS crisis led to heightened fears about migrants and an increase in homophobic rhetoric. In an attempt to quell the fear surrounding the perceived loss of heteronormativity and the fear of migrants, Reagan signed a policy in 1987 that banned HIV-positive migrants from entering the country. However, these two pieces of legislation (IRCA and the 1987 policy) were somewhat contradictory, as they led to the deportation of numerous queer and trans migrants who had previously been granted amnesty. Frequently a positive AIDS diagnosis became the reason for their expulsion, even when AIDS was contracted in the U.S.

The Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 was largely paradoxical, highlighting societal fears around this crisis and the disparities in healthcare access for migrants. This legislation, “provided amnesty for certain long-term residents to gain legal permanent status, including through a special expedited process for farmworkers” (Reagan “Immigration Reform and Control Act”). This holds profound significance because, despite the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 granting amnesty to certain long-term residents, the emergence of the AIDS crisis instigated widespread fear among Americans. Consequently, individuals who had been granted citizenship under the act found themselves facing deportation due to societal apprehensions surrounding AIDS. In the chapter, “National Common Sense and the Ban on HIV Migrants,” Chávez writes, “National common sense can easily be the grounds to render seemingly incommensurable positions commensurate in the name of the national interest” (100). As long as the legislation was created with the facade of protecting national security and interests, it did not need to be backed up by scientific logic or empirical data.

This deportation of individuals diagnosed with AIDS, not only harmed those with the disease, but also their families and communities. Conceivably, an individual who contracted AIDS in the United States could be deported back to their native country after the diagnosis. The emergence of the AIDS crisis led to further disparities in healthcare access for migrants, as often individuals with legal status still faced barriers when attempting to access healthcare (Luibhéid “Treated Neither with Respect nor with Dignity”). Many individuals were afraid to contact medical services out of fear they or their family members would be deported. Additionally, the focus on exploitative labor, specifically farmworkers, demonstrates the United States needs this workforce to support the economy. Reagan contradicted himself by first ensuring amnesty for migrant farmworkers while simultaneously claiming that immigrants are harming the country

through disease and crime. While this Act is framed as supporting migrants, instead it ensured that U.S. industries could continue to exploit this vulnerable population.

In May of 1987, the Public Health Service (PHS), added AIDS to the dangerous contagious disease list and debated whether HIV should be added to this list. On May 31st, 1987, former President Ronald Reagan delivered a speech honoring the American Foundation for AIDS Research. He stated, “The rationale behind this proposal stemmed from the fact that HIV-infected aliens were capable of transmitting the HIV that would ultimately develop into AIDS” (cited in Thompson 152). The Senate passed an amendment to urge the President to add HIV to the list and in August, HIV, alongside AIDS, was added to the contagious disease list. He stated, “Innocent people are being infected by this virus, and some of them are going to acquire AIDS and die” (PBS “Documents - President Reagan’s”). He continued to tell the story of a woman in a rural county in Kentucky who unknowingly contracted AIDS from her husband, who was an IV drug user. The “innocent and unknowing” rural woman is then compared to HIV-carrying immigrants. “I’ve asked the Department of Health and Human Services to determine as soon as possible the extent to which the AIDS virus has penetrated our society and to predict its future dimensions. I’ve also asked HHS to add the AIDS virus to the list of contagious diseases for which immigrants and aliens seeking permanent residence in the United States can be denied entry. They are presently denied entry for other contagious diseases” (PBS “Documents - President Reagan’s”). While the U.S.-born woman who contracted the disease is a victim of AIDS, immigrants seeking permanent residence have “penetrated our society” and knowingly spread the disease. Immigrants are framed as invaders and active perpetrators of the disease, while white Americans are only victims of its effects, who must be protected through

bans and surveillance. This type of rhetoric is not new but builds on already existing fears and anxieties surrounding non-white migrants.

Senator Jesse Helms, an important actor in the Senate debates about whether to exclude migrants with AIDS or HIV from the U.S. stated, “It is only elementary that as the epidemic continues to spread abroad, immigrants in greater numbers will be bringing the AIDS virus to the United States. So my amendment, I think, simply makes common sense” (cited in Chávez 74). By even utilizing the phrase “common sense” Helms is ignoring the multiple medical entities that have stated that an HIV ban will harm vulnerable populations and is selectively deciding what he believes will “protect the general population against the spread of AIDS” (Chávez 72). By purposefully ignoring the fact that AIDS has already entered the United States and that many migrants have contracted this disease in America, Helms is controlling the narrative. He decided what pertinent information to share with citizens. By using phrases like “simply,” “obvious” or “fair enough” to describe the proposal, Helms is utilizing common sense discourse to shape Americans’ opinion about the gravity or impact of this ban. National common sense, often described as “the best for the nation” is built around ideas about race, sexuality, and culture. Chávez writes, “Common sense refers to the incoherent folklore and beliefs that characterize the conformity of a given people to the interests of the ruling class” (84). In other words, it creates a hegemonic system in which those with power decide what the norm is and how to protect those who conform to this norm. It sets the restrictions for who belongs and who does not, largely dependent upon the needs and demands of the ruling class. While the Reagan administration was apathetic to the crisis when it was largely affecting queer and trans people of color, the emigration of HIV-positive migrants threatened to impact “regular American citizens.” Chávez writes, “Although Congress writ large had repeatedly shown a lack of concern for US Americans

with HIV as the primary victims were homosexuals and drug users—many Black and of color—the infamous “general population” was...increasingly at risk with the migration of HIV-positive people” (98). In order to protect “innocent Americans,” Reagan and his administration had to ban and exclude potential threats to this “general population,” white heterosexual citizens who were deserving of medical care and social services.

This “common sense” narrative is often utilized in times of mass panic or fear. The rhetoric surrounding queer individuals as immoral was used to isolate or alienate this population. In the chapter “AIDS and the Rhetoric of Quarantine,” Chávez states, “Quarantine’s entrance into AIDS discourse in the early 1980s was quite narrow: the already vilified gay community anticipated the way it would be treated and virulently anti-gay evangelical Christian leaders predictably called for extreme measures against gays and others living with AIDS” (46). One story, in particular, exemplified this phenomenon. Fabian K. Bridges was criminalized and vilified due to his AIDS diagnosis, sexuality, and the fact that he was a sex worker. While the details of Bridges’ life are largely contested between sources, the public reaction paints a clear picture. Calls to lock Bridges up and mass hysteria regarding “incorrigible” AIDS victims flooded the media after Bridges was placed in the limelight in the form of a documentary film about his life (Chávez 54). While there has been exhaustive research on the impacts of the AIDS crisis on the gay community, women, particularly sex workers, have been left out of the conversation, similarly to queer and trans migrants. Many of these women were poor and were criminalized due to their profession, however, they often fail to be included in historical accounts of the AIDS crisis, demonstrating the need for further research (Chávez 48).

The rhetoric surrounding the AIDS crisis perpetuated heteronormative and white supremacist ideals as the standard to safeguard, often resorting to measures such as deportation,

and exclusion. The stigmatization of LGBTQIA+ communities, the neglect of minority communities, the exclusionary measures put in place, and the political and social marginalization of AIDS-infected individuals all contributed to and created this rhetoric. Chávez argues, “It also reveals the pervasive logic that connects AIDS only with homosexuals and sees only Americans, a category devoid of homosexuals, as worthy of protection from the dreaded disease” (89).

Migrants who had contracted the disease in the United States and were now citizens were not included in the population worth protecting. The norm of the “nuclear family,” a byproduct of capitalism, has been the “rationale” for excluding migrants, which was heightened during the AIDS crisis due to increased homophobia and xenophobia. “Thus, in this debate, the deep alienating logic coupled with the national common sense of protecting economic and moral health come to the fore” (Luibhéid and Chávez 4). Queer and trans migrants found themselves wrongly scapegoated for the AIDS crisis, leading to their unjust exclusion and stigmatization.

Reagan’s announcement in March of 1987 regarding the FDA’s progress in approving and developing an experimental drug to treat AIDS revealed the selective approach to healthcare and emphasized national interests over humanitarian concerns. Reagan stated, “This step to roll big government back just a little bit further could very well mean less pain and suffering for thousands of seriously ill Americans” (Reagan “Radio Address”). While immigrants must follow the correct governmental regulations to acquire access to the United States and treatment for AIDS, Americans should not have to be subject to “big government.” The pain and suffering of seriously ill Americans was Reagan’s number one priority. This is significant because he initially emphasized that medicine and social services were strictly reserved for American citizens, demonstrating the importance of the nation in regard to disease or conflict.

This selective approach to healthcare often reinforced existing inequalities in social services and perpetuated a division of “us versus them.” Reagan followed this FDA announcement with a comment on national security. He stated that the United States will continue to “support democracy and help resist tyranny” in Central America. While the United States continued to engage with and exert its power in the Global South, supporting or even recognizing migrants from Central America is out of the question. This contradiction highlighted the hypocrisy of U.S. foreign policy and immigration enforcement as funds can be allocated to “fight for democracy in Central America,” however, the U.S. is unable to afford care or services for migrants.

The establishment of the Presidential Commission on the Human Immunodeficiency Virus Epidemic by former President Ronald Reagan in June 1987 marked a pivotal moment in the United States’ response to the spread of HIV. While AIDS had already been added to the “dangerous and contagious disease” list in May, this commission was created to “review the role of the United States in the international AIDS pandemic” (Reagan “Executive Order 12601”). This commission is significant as it was enacted a month after the 1987 legislation that banned migrants who tested positive for HIV from entering the United States. While immigrants had already been scapegoated as the source of this epidemic, a major component of this executive order was determining the United States’ role in the international AIDS pandemic. This demonstrates that research and statistics did not back up this ban, rather, it was based upon common sense discourse that was seeped in nationalism and American exceptionalism.

While the United States government had been for the most part ignoring this epidemic, neglecting to gain additional research and statistics on the disease, their preliminary step was to ban migrants from entering the country. Reagan was singlehandedly focused on passing the ban

without assessing the facts regarding HIV. The decision to prioritize ideological and political goals over public health concerns emphasized the importance of evidence-based decision-making, especially in regard to an epidemic or national security concern. Reagan stated, “The members (of this commission) shall be distinguished individuals who have experience in such relevant disciplines as medicine, epidemiology, virology, law, insurance, education, and public health” (Reagan “Executive Order 12601”). However, despite the various disciplines, this presidential commission lacked diversity and often didn’t include populations who have been most affected by the AIDS crisis, including queer and trans migrants. Additionally, Reagan failed to include social work or harm reduction in his commission, therefore, those most vulnerable in society were often overlooked or ignored.

Reagan’s Proclamation 5764 in January 1988 not only celebrated Americans and declared the month of March as American Red Cross Month but also exemplified a nationalist discourse that framed Americans as saviors while overlooking the systemic inequalities within the United States. Reagan stated, “Last year, the Red Cross clothed, fed, or sheltered 450,000 disaster victims, and through the generosity of the American people it provided individuals with \$122 million in disaster relief” (Reagan “Proclamation 5764”). This proclamation is significant as it continued to frame Americans as saviors, the healers of disease, while outsiders were framed as invaders or spreaders. Due to the “generosity of the American people” the United States will continue to care for and ensure the nation’s safety. The words “nation” and “Americans” are repeated to emphasize the celebration of the United States. Reagan had “saved” the innocent victims of foreign countries and the nation’s blood supply but failed to mention the ways in which AIDS continued to ravage the queer and trans community at this moment. He only referred to “potential threats to the blood supply” and a hope to “get the facts” in reference to

AIDS, ignoring the deaths of thousands of LGBTQIA+ individuals and the delayed and apathetic reaction to this crisis. The vague reference to AIDS underscores how nationalist discourse is always prioritized in global conversations. Even when in an epidemic, presidential discourse continues to exhibit American exceptionalism and a focus on a celebration of the nation and its values. This selective framing of American “generosity,” overlooks the system inequalities that occur within the United States.

Ronald Reagan’s use of common sense discourse to justify the banning and exclusion of migrants with HIV or AIDS reinforced heteronormativity and white supremacy, setting the stage for the ongoing discrimination and oppression of queer and trans migrants. In the early 1980s, the widespread fear and misinformation surrounding the disease, coupled with the conservative political climate of Reagan’s presidency led to discriminatory and ineffective policies that disproportionately impacted LGBTQIA+ individuals of color. By reemphasizing the importance of the nation, American values, and most importantly, American borders, Reagan’s rhetoric often clashed with public health needs and reinforced misconceptions about the immorality of individuals who had contracted AIDS, especially if they were queer or trans migrants. In the article, “Treated Neither with Respect nor with Dignity,” Luibhéid writes, “immigration controls reproduce the nation and citizenship as sites of inequality, too, by legally admitting migrants who serve white, patriarchal, heterosexual, middle-class norms, while criminalizing, “illegalizing,” and making disposable other migrants” (20). Reagan enacted legislation and pushed rhetoric that reinforced multiple inequalities and marked who may or may not acquire legal status and the services that accompany it. This system not only ensured that white, heterosexual citizens were prioritized but that migrants continued emigrating to the United States, prompted by U.S. intervention in the Global South.

By centering the United States as the “savior” of the Global South, either through ongoing involvement in Central America or aid and assistance to countries impacted by AIDS, Ronald Reagan positioned the U.S. as the global leader, fighting for democracy and human health. However, limited access to medication and the prioritization of certain populations demonstrated how race, immigration status, sexual orientation, and nation impacted who was perceived as a victim and who was perceived as a perpetrator and spreader of disease. Reagan emphasized the distinction between “bad” and “good” migrants based on HIV status, however, this dichotomy does not only pertain to Reagan. Barack Obama continued to enforce this dichotomy, this time dependent on one’s criminal status or ability to contribute to the U.S. “society,” for example, the use of DACA or the criminalization of survival jobs. Obama additionally used common sense discourse to justify and defend this binary between good and bad immigrants, utilizing fear, misinformation, and self-fulfilling prophecies to justify the lack of statistics or research surrounding the policies.

Chapter 2

Barack Obama and Neoliberalism

There is no pride in how LGBTQ immigrants are treated in this country and there can be no celebration with an administration that has the ability to keep us detained and in danger or release us to freedom.

–Jennicet Gutiérrez, *Washington Blade*, June 25, 2015

While the Obama administration is often celebrated for its progressive ideals and rhetoric, the reality for marginalized groups often differed from this narrative. During his presidency, Barack Obama frequently used common sense discourse and neoliberal values to create a false dichotomy between migrants. The characteristics of neoliberalism include a free trade market, privatization of resources and public services, upward distribution of wealth, and hostility toward increased wages or improved working conditions (Brown 40). However, the influences of neoliberalism extend beyond the market and economy, they affect political rationality. Obama emphasized that strong immigration laws and policies are essential to upholding public safety, while simultaneously acknowledging the contributions that immigrants provide to American society. In order to justify both sides of this discourse, he employed rhetoric that framed immigrants into categories of “good” versus “bad.” This dichotomy perpetuated neoliberal principles of individual responsibility and meritocracy. Stuart Hall and Alan O’Shea argue that neoliberalism is so normalized within society, that it has become “common sense,” ignoring the inequalities and social ills it creates. They explain that the idea of “fairness” within neoliberalism leads to “a dismantling of any collective social responsibility and a reduction of

citizens to barterers - something for something: worlds away from the collective social model” (Hall and O’Shea 19). This idea of “fairness” is often applied to discourse on immigration, serving as a tool to justify increased restrictions and policies. Obama frequently argued that in order to protect the rights and opportunities of citizens, the government must control and limit immigration, uphold the law, and protect resources. However, this idea of “fairness” does not account for the various forms of oppression, violence, and discrimination that migrants, specifically queer and trans migrants, face and how the United States has directly created the conditions which force individuals to migrate. This chapter will delve into how Obama’s immigration policies and rhetoric, despite the fact that they often emphasized fairness and equality, have perpetuated systemic inequalities and ignored the complexities of migration.

Neoliberalism’s influence extends beyond the economy and shapes ideas about individual responsibility and morality. In the article, “Neoliberalism and the End of Liberal Democracy,” Wendy Brown states, “In making the individual fully responsible for her/himself, neo-liberalism equates moral responsibility with rational action; it relieves the discrepancy between economic and moral behavior by configuring morality entirely as a matter of rational deliberation about costs, benefits, and consequences” (42). Rather than addressing the social or political factors that may impact one’s decisions and their ability to succeed, neoliberalism holds individuals “responsible” for their actions. This goes back to the point of “fairness” or meritocracy where the assumption that all individuals have equal rights and opportunities often ignores the systemic oppression and discrimination that migrants, specifically queer and trans migrants, face. Brown elaborates stating, “It figures individuals as rational, calculating creatures whose moral autonomy is measured by their capacity for “self-care”—the ability to provide for their own needs and service their own ambitions” (42). Neoliberalism obscures the ways in which the state

perpetuates this oppression against marginalized groups by shifting the focus onto personal responsibility. Obama's presidency was shaped by neoliberal policies that emphasized individual responsibility and relied on law enforcement, rather than attempting to address the systemic issues which cause migration.

Obama's enactment of the Priority Enforcement Program (PEP) in November 2014 which prioritized the deportation of "felons not families" perpetuated migrant villainization and bolstered ICE's power and authority. The Priority Enforcement Program detailed that "Under PEP, ICE will seek the transfer of a removable individual when that individual has been convicted of an offense listed under the DHS civil immigration enforcement priorities, has intentionally participated in an organized criminal gang to further the illegal activity of the gang, or poses a danger to national security" (Immigration and Customs Enforcement). While Obama often championed the rights of migrants, his priority enforcement reform led to the strengthening of ICE, the villainization of migrants, and furthered binaries between Americans and "foreigners." The wording "danger to public safety" or "danger to national security" emphasized how not only were Americans at risk, but the nation and its values were as well. Returning to Wendy Brown's article, "Neoliberalism and the End of Liberal Democracy," the author states, "Again, however, translated into neoliberal terms, 'democracy,' here or there, does not signify a set of independent political institutions and civic practices comprising equality, freedom, autonomy and the principle of popular sovereignty but rather indicates only a state and subjects organized by market rationality" (Brown 48). Therefore, the "public safety" and "national security" Obama is referring to is not related to protecting democracy but rather market logic.

By further militarizing ICE and creating a culture of fear, Obama expanded the power of federal immigration authorities. This reform resulted in increased raids, detention, and

deportations which created fear, and distrust of law enforcement, and often broke apart families. Since the rhetoric of this reform emphasized “safety” it created deeper divisions between citizens and immigrants and fueled xenophobia. While Obama justified PEP, claiming that it would only affect immigrants who commit serious and harmful crimes, this was not the case. In 2014, Luis Lopez Acabal, a long-time resident of California and father of three children was deported to Guatemala. The reason for this deportation was a minor traffic violation, even though Acabal has no criminal record and is the sole caretaker for his son Kevin, who has autism. “He applied for asylum, saying he could meet the legal requirement of “credible fear” of returning to his home country, but he was rejected, and given 45 days to leave the country” (Ollstein). This instance clearly exemplified how in reality, families are being torn apart and harmed by PEP, not just “criminals.” This reform strengthened the power and control of ICE and furthered the inaccurate and harmful dichotomy of “bad” and “good” migrants.

The portrayal of unaccompanied minors as innocent victims in the 2014 Central American child migrant crisis served to justify increased security measures and the perpetuation of migrant dichotomies. There were reports of a massive influx of unauthorized crossings at the United States-Mexico border. The report claimed that most of the individuals crossing were unaccompanied minors, fleeing from violence in Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador. Contrary to other surges in migration, this situation was framed as a humanitarian crisis, both by the Obama administration and the mainstream media. The portrayal of children as vulnerable can be utilized to advocate for the protection of undocumented families, however, it is often used to justify increased border security. In the article “The Rhetoric of Family in the U.S. Immigration Movement: A Queer Migration Analysis of the 2014 Central American Child Migrant ‘Crisis,” Karma R. Chávez and Hana Masri write, “even when framed as a refugee or humanitarian crisis

and therefore supposedly separate from economic migration, images of children, which traffic in rhetorics of vulnerability and innocence, easily pair with the pro-family, pro-child rhetoric of the immigration rights movement to, paradoxically, justify the nation's maintenance and fortification of its borders in ways that harm all migrants" (210). In order to protect these "unaccompanied minors," the United States government often argued that they must militarize and control the border to reduce harm. Wendy Brown writes "For progressives, neoliberalism...is compatible with, and sometimes even productive of, authoritarian, despotic, paramilitaristic, and corrupt state forms as well as agents within civil society" (38). Neoliberal policies often intersect within authoritarian and militaristic state forms which exert power and control over marginalized populations.

The idea that undocumented children are "innocent" while their parents are "guilty" perpetuated the dichotomy of "good" and "bad" migrants that Obama often relies on. Chávez and Masri write, "Framing this situation as a humanitarian crisis involving innocent children not only reinforces the savior status of the U.S. nation, but it also plays on existing stereotypes about the poor parenting and family values of racialized migrants" (218). The authors explain that while there was an equal amount of children who were apprehended while they were with their families, the media and the Obama administration focused on unaccompanied children to emphasize their "innocence." However, this is not new for the Obama administration, as the catchphrase "felons not families" was pertinent to Obama's immigration policies. The former president was able to use pro-family rhetoric while simultaneously enacting harsh policies by relying on a neoliberal framework of meritocracy and "fairness."

This emphasis on family not only created a dichotomy between migrants but largely relied on white supremacist and heteronormative notions of the nation. Chávez and Masri write

that by utilizing a queer critique, one can see how “the lens of ‘reproductive futurism’ interrogates childhood’s boundedness to white, middle-class, heteronormative, and nationalistic values” (211). The emphasis on families often excluded marginalized groups who do not conform to the narrow and traditional ideals about what constitutes a family. Additionally, queer and trans migrants are more likely to be targeted by the police, and thereby, labeled as “felons.” The Priority Enforcement Program was often celebrated for focusing on the true “threats” to the nation, however, vulnerable populations were often the most affected by this act. The Obama administration refused to delay the deportation of “parents of undocumented youth who benefited from the 2012 DACA; seasonal workers without connections to U.S. citizen children; LGBT immigrants, especially youth and trans people, who are more likely to have been homeless and therefore to have committed low-level criminal offenses; domestic violence survivors who can’t get visas under the Violence Against Women Act; and Black immigrants who are more likely to be racially profiled by police and therefore either have a felony record or have family members who do” (Chávez and Masri 219). Obama’s narrow definition of “family” failed to acknowledge how immigrants, specifically queer and trans migrants, are criminalized within the United States and often echoed heteronormative understandings of the “nuclear family” which further marginalized LGBTQIA+ communities.

The implementation of DACA, in June of 2012, exemplified a neoliberal approach to immigration, providing temporary relief while extracting value without offering a permanent pathway to citizenship. DACA provided temporary relief from deportation and allowed undocumented immigrants to obtain work permits if they were brought to the United States as children. In order to be eligible for DACA, individuals must arrive in the United States before they turn 16, graduate from high school, pass a background check, and hold residence in the U.S.

since 2007. While Obama was praised for granting temporary protection for certain undocumented individuals, DACA does not provide a pathway to permanent citizenship. In the article, “Treated neither with Respect nor with Dignity,” Eithne Luibhéid explains that, “Some 800,000 migrants, including an estimated 36,000 who identified as LGBTQ, received DACA status. The DACA program reflected a neoliberal dream (or nightmare) in terms of allowing for the extraction of value while providing no social benefits” (27). Since DACA did not offer a path to citizenship, it had to be regularly renewed, therefore, DACA holders could be denied, often for petty infractions (Arizona State University).

DACA allowed the United States to extract value from migrants without offering social benefits or even citizenship, further emphasizing Obama’s use of neoliberalism in conjunction with immigration policies. Luibhéid expands further on the implications of DACA for queer and trans migrants, stating, “The experiences of LGBTQ DACA recipients illustrate some of the complexities involved in getting, keeping, or losing legal status: the extraordinary variety of statuses available and the (im)possibilities and constraints associated with each one; how legal statuses intersect with other axes of privilege or vulnerability; and how migrants may transit among statuses, which impacts not just themselves but also those around them” (“Treated Neither with Respect nor with Dignity” 28). Queer and trans migrants face additional obstacles when attempting to access resources and opportunities due to their gender or sexuality which are further exacerbated by the constant transitions in citizenship status and the stress of navigating the legal system. The implementation of DACA under the Obama administration exemplified neoliberalism within immigration policy and further perpetuated the dichotomy of a “good” migrant, who is deemed worthy of temporary relief versus the “bad” migrant who is criminalized for their status.

Obama's Las Vegas Address on Immigration Reform in January 2013 encapsulated the complexities and contradictions of U.S. immigration policy, as it emphasized enforcement measures and acknowledged economic contributions while overlooking the systemic injustices faced by migrant communities. Obama gave the Address on Immigration Reform in Las Vegas and focused on the urgent need for comprehensive changes in immigration legislation and policies. Obama stated, "We focused our enforcement efforts on criminals who are here illegally and who endanger our communities. And today, deportations of criminals is at its highest level ever" (Obama "Remarks by the President"). Obama again emphasized the fact that illegal crossings were down nearly 80 percent, however, he refused to mention what happens to migrants once deported and the tactics that ICE employed, including ice boxes, sexual and physical violence, and isolation. Obama argued that "we strengthened security at the borders so that we could finally stem the tide of illegal immigrants. We put more boots on the ground on the southern border than at any time in our history" (Obama "Remarks by the President").

Government intervention in borderlands is negative in so many ways: the Indigenous communities present are disrupted, the environment is degraded, and the overall militarization of the border can lead to excessive violence and dehumanization. By stating these criminals are "endangering our communities," Obama was utilizing the common sense discourse of, "they are unsafe, we must keep them out." However, the situation is not so black and white. Obama did not back up this rhetoric with statistics or research, however, he continued to push the idea that many migrants are felons and, therefore, cannot be integrated into American culture. Obama continued to downplay the effects immigrants have on the economy and the reliance the United States has on cheap and unsafe labor. He stated, "There's another economic reason why we need reform. It's not just about the folks who come here illegally and have the effect they have on our

economy. It's also about the folks who try to come here legally but have a hard time doing so, and the effect that has on our economy" (Obama "Remarks by the President"). Obama emphasized the importance of migrants to the economy, however, often contradicted himself by simultaneously arguing that harnessing the talents and contributions of immigrants will lead to a thriving economy and that criminal migrants are one of the United States' number one threats to security and prosperity.

Obama continued to reiterate the need for comprehensive immigration reform, emphasizing "fairness" and accountability in the American economy. He stated "If we're truly committed to strengthening our middle class and providing more ladders of opportunity to those who are willing to work hard to make it in the middle class, we've got to fix the system. We have to make sure that every business and every worker in America is playing by the same set of rules. We have to bring this shadow economy into the light so that everybody is held accountable, businesses for who they hire, and immigrants for getting on the right side of the law. That's common sense, and that's why we need comprehensive immigration reform" (Obama "Remarks by the President"). While Obama is acknowledging the economic contributions of migrants, he simultaneously downplayed and ignored the challenges and injustices that immigrants face. His focus on the shadow economy is a step towards addressing the exploitation of migrants, however, by overlooking the systemic factors that contribute to migrant exploitation, such as labor market dynamics, immigration policies, and power imbalances, Obama did not fully address the realities faced by migrant workers. The former president further emphasized the "good" versus "bad" migrant dichotomy by mentioning "immigrants...getting on the right side of the law." This language implied criminality for migrants who do not apply for citizenship,

ignoring the realities of the immigration system and how difficult it can be to navigate legal pathways.

As stated previously, Obama's Address on Immigration Executive Action in November 2014 articulated plans to strengthen the immigration system, utilizing common sense discourse that ignored the underlying causes and complexities of migration. Obama stated, "Felons, not families. Criminals, not children. Gang members, not a mom who's working hard to provide for her kids. We'll prioritize, just like law enforcement does every day" (Obama "November 20, 2014"). By creating such a stark dichotomy between criminals and children, Obama employed common sense discourse. Rather than focusing on what these crimes are, why migrants may be engaging in these crimes, and the overall effect on the community when 80 percent of criminals are deported, Obama instead praised law enforcement and the U.S. government for focusing on "actual threats." However, Obama quickly backpedaled, claiming that America is a nation of immigrants. He stated, "That what makes us Americans is our shared commitment to an ideal — that all of us are created equal, and all of us have the chance to make of our lives what we will" (Obama "November 20, 2014"). Past immigrants were able to adjust to our "equitable" society, to ingrain and lift themselves up from their bootstraps, therefore, those "cheating" the system must be punished. Obama emphasized that immigration is good, however, only in a legal and exploitative way. This binary framing oversimplified the harsh realities that many migrants face who may be forced to engage in criminal activities either for protection or survival.

Focusing solely on enforcement without addressing the underlying causes of migration perpetuated a cycle of marginalization in which migrants are framed as the causes of society's problems, including disease and crime. When examining the underlying causes of migration from the Global South, it becomes apparent that the United States has largely contributed to the

economic and social problems that may cause one to leave their native country in search of increased wages or more opportunities. For one, the history of colonialism and imperialism has a lasting impact on countries in the Global South as the exploitation of resources and labor has contributed to economic disparities and social instability. Additionally, the United States has influenced economic policies through the IMF and World Bank. Since the 1970s the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank have made a series of loans to the Mexican government. However, these loans come with the condition that the Mexican government must sign a letter promising the IMF that the salaries of Mexican workers will not go up. These multinationals force Mexico to break its own laws and exploit its workers. Lastly, the United States has directly contributed to political instability and conflict in many regions in the Global South which may force people to flee in search of safety (PBS “Film Description - Maquilapolis”). The neoliberal values of free markets and deregulation have been the leading force behind these decisions in both domestic and international contexts.

The interruption by Jennicet Gutiérrez at the White House Pride reception in June 2015, demanding an end to the detention and deportation of queer and trans migrants, served as a significant critique of the homonormative narrative of progress cultivated during Obama's presidency. Gutiérrez, a TransLatina activist and cofounder of Familia: Trans Queer Liberation Movement in Los Angeles, works for the liberation of Latinx communities. This reception took place two months after executive orders on immigration “prioritized the deportation of ‘felons not families’” (Zeneca 180). Gutiérrez chanted “President Obama, release all LGBTQ [from] detention centers! President Obama, stop the torture and abuse of trans women in detention centers!” The audience, who were mostly white gay men, shushed and shamed Gutiérrez, even stating “Enough... this is not for you, this is for all of us” (Zeneca 182). Gutiérrez, a trans

woman of color, is ostensibly not included in this LGBTQIA community that Obama was protecting and fighting for. Gutiérrez directly challenged the narrative of progress for the queer and trans community that was cultivated during Obama's presidency. While the administration worked to repeal "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" and supported same-sex marriage, Gutiérrez's interruption highlighted the limitations of this so-called "progress" and how marginalized communities are typically excluded or left behind in the pursuit of mainstream LGBTQIA+ rights agendas. Homonormativity allows for a certain amount of progressiveness as long as it does not dismantle or even threaten existing power structures.

Zeneca writes, "Gutiérrez turns a painful scene into one that refuses hegemonic constructions of affective comportment and normative notions of civility. As she continuously reminds dominant LGBT communities and the American public, her existence is indeed *resistance*" (emphasis in original 184). Gutiérrez's very existence is an act of resistance against established norms and ideas regarding civility. Her protests fought against this supposed "shame" and demanded that the issues and struggles of queer and trans migrants be heard. This instance exemplified homonormativity, and how those facing intersectional oppression are often silenced within mainstream political discussions. Due to Gutiérrez's intersectional identities, she faces various forces of violence and marginalization, further exacerbated through the inhumane practices of the INS.

In June 2016, during his visit to the Parliament of Canada in Ottawa, Obama emphasized the strong relationship between the U.S. and Canada, using homonormative rhetoric to highlight the "progress" in LGBTQIA+ rights. Obama stated, "It's because we respect all people that the world looks to us as an example. The colors of the rainbow flag have flown on Parliament Hill. They have lit up the White House. That is a testament to our progress, but also the work that

remains to ensure true equality for our fellow citizens who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender” (Obama “Remarks to the Parliament in Ottawa”). This was significant as it emphasized the use of homonormative rhetoric in Western countries like the United States and Canada. Both Obama and Trudeau were congratulating themselves due to their respect for the LGBT community, however, this does not account for the numerous queer and trans migrants that Obama confined in the name of “safety.” The emphasis on the rainbow flag symbolized LGBTQIA+ inclusion, however, it failed to address the systemic oppression faced by individuals in these communities, especially those who are marginalized due to their immigration status. By refusing to engage in any sort of intersectional analysis, these world leaders were reasserting that regardless of sexual orientation, one must fit the heteronormative structures which shape these Western countries. Obama stated that other countries should look to the U.S. and Canada for their values, further pushing the idea that the West is more progressive than countries in the Global South. This speech demonstrated Western exceptionalism and the neoliberal logic of market-based solutions over social welfare.

While the xenophobia of the Reagan and Trump administrations is more apparent, Obama often utilized subtle discourse to vilify migrants and praise migrants’ accomplishments. For example, he often praised migrants for their labor and their ability to “integrate” into American society. Regardless of how subtle the discourse is, the outcome or consequences are the same. Migrants are deemed worthy within American culture and society based on their so-called “contributions” to the economy and their community. By emphasizing “fairness” and meritocracy, it ignored the multiple forms of oppression that migrants face and rather implied a level playing field between all individuals in which success is dependent solely on one’s abilities and efforts. In reality, the systemic barriers and historical injustices that migrants face greatly

impact their ability to “succeed” or “integrate” into American society. By claiming that America is a land of opportunity in which individuals are treated equally regardless of their race, socio-economic status, gender, sexuality, etc, it ignores the sexual and physical violence which disproportionately affects queer and trans migrants.

While the harmful and inaccurate dichotomies of the Obama administration were detrimental to the rights and experiences of migrants, especially queer and trans migrants, Donald Trump took this discourse a step further. Trump played on American citizens’ fear of non-white migrants and employed outright xenophobia and racism within his discourse. His administration sought to dismantle any remaining protections for undocumented migrants, including DACA, and implemented a “zero tolerance” policy which resulted in the separation of families at the border. In the next chapter, I will explore how Trump’s rhetoric not only further marginalized queer and trans migrants but exacerbated systemic inequalities for all immigrants.

Chapter 3

Donald Trump and “The Wall”

I would tell them to please stop separating people because all it does is wound people.

And it turns into such a pain, such a wound that no bandage can ever cover the wound.

It’s a pain that can’t be erased.

–Fifteen-year-old boy separated from his mother, Guatemala,

Women’s Refugee Commission, 2023

In contrast to Obama, whose true sentiments about migrants were hidden behind the language of neoliberalism, Donald Trump’s presidency was marked by harsh and demeaning rhetoric and policies concerning migrants. Trump implemented a “zero-tolerance” policy in 2018 which resulted in the separation of thousands of migrant children from their families at the border (Cheng). Trump also fought to construct a border wall along the U.S.-Mexico border, implemented travel bans targeting Muslim countries, sought to dismantle DACA, and reduced refugee admissions. Overall, Trump’s campaign and presidency focused on protecting national sovereignty and American values through deterrence, border security, and strict legislation. Trump utilized divisive and polarizing language to discuss migrants and emphasized the need for drastic changes in law and culture in order to return to America’s so-called “former glory and prosperity.” He focused on the morality of migrants and made sweeping and broad statements about the causes of immigration and the potential consequences of lax policy and legislation. This rhetoric often employed fear tactics to justify the harsh policies and emphasized stories of crimes committed by undocumented migrants to divide and scare Americans. He framed

migration as not only a security concern, but an economic issue, as Trump frequently argued that migrants were stealing jobs from Americans and utilizing social services. This chapter will examine how Trump's policies and discourse further villainized migrants, resulting in a culture of fear and hostility towards migrant communities, specifically queer and trans migrants. This culture of fear not only perpetuated harmful stereotypes but also justified harsh policies that harmed and dehumanized migrants.

The "zero tolerance" policy implemented by former Attorney General Jeff Sessions in 2018 resulted in the widespread separation of migrant families and sparked significant humanitarian concerns (American Oversight). This policy federally prosecuted all migrants who illegally crossed the Southwest border, including individuals seeking asylum. As part of this policy, children were separated from their parents or guardians at the border in order to deter others from attempting to migrate. In the article, "Family Separation in Their Own Words: The Lasting Harm of the Trump Administration's Zero Tolerance Policy," The Women's Refugee Commission states that "In total, at least 5,569 children were separated from their parents or guardians under the Trump administration, a figure that includes separations during and after the formal zero-tolerance policy. More than 1,000 children remain separated from their parents as of November 30, 2023." Not only did this law cause immense physical and mental stress for both the parents and children, the government failed to track the children separated leading to confusion and suffering for individuals attempting to reunite (The Women's Refugee Commission). Attorney Sessions stated, "If you cross the border unlawfully, then we will prosecute you. It's that simple. If you smuggle illegal aliens across our border, then we will prosecute you. If you are smuggling a child, then we will prosecute you, and that child may be separated from you, as required by law" (Democracy Now). While Sessions hid behind the law,

he ignored how his administration had directly implemented these conditions and the humanitarian crisis it produced.

Both children and parents separated have had to cope with lasting trauma from this experience and many have still not been reunited. In the article, “The Psychological Effects of Forced Family Separation on Asylum-Seeking Children and Parents at the US-Mexico border: A Qualitative Analysis of Medico-legal Documents,” Hampton et al. stated that sixteen of the nineteen parents involved in the analysis showed one or more major mental health conditions and three out of the nineteen experienced suicidal ideation during the separation. These results are replicated among the children who were separated. In the article “How the “Zero Tolerance” Family Separation Policy Harmed Children and Families,” Bruzzone states that “100% of children exhibited symptoms of PTSD, major depressive disorder, or generalized anxiety disorder” (2). Not only did both children and parents exhibit severe mental health issues as a result of forced family separation at the U.S.-Mexico border, but many feared they would be separated again in the future. This legislation left lasting impacts on migrant families as many have to cope with the trauma of being forcibly separated from their loved ones.

Trump employed metaphorical language to construct a narrative that intertwined the physical construction of a border wall with broader themes of national identity, economic competition, and security concerns. In the article, “The Business of Building a Wall: Donald Trump’s Rhetorical Signature” Brandon M. Johnson and Mary E. Stuckey explain that Trump’s demands to build a wall and make Mexico pay for it are not only based on his aggressive stance on immigration but also serve as a rhetorical strategy to rally his supporters and frame issues of national identity and economic competition: “Trump asks, ‘When do we beat Mexico at the border? They’re laughing at us, at our stupidity. And now they are beating us economically. They

are not our friend, believe me. But they're killing us economically” (Johnson and Stuckey 164). Trump framed Mexico as the business enemy and declared the wall would serve as a barrier that would both stop the movement of immigrants and the flow of jobs. This border wall not only established a new American-centric economic program but also capitalized on the fear Trump had cultivated around the migration of racialized minorities.

Therefore, this “wall” operated on two levels: it was a structure, but it was also a symbolic example of Trump’s exclusionary rhetoric. Johnson and Stuckey write, “Trump simplifies larger debates about immigration policy into a soundbite operating on a spatial logic... building a wall stops not only the actual movement of people and goods but also the symbolic loss of jobs and influence that he describes other countries as taking through bad trade deals” (164). In other words, Trump utilized common sense rhetoric of fear and racism to justify the perceived necessity of the wall. Mexico is framed as a thief of American jobs, values, and even safety. Therefore, this vision of America, upon which Trump built his campaign and presidency, ultimately hinged on an exclusionary national identity that marginalized non-white individuals and privileged white citizens. Queer and trans migrants seeking asylum were marginalized and disproportionately affected by this rhetoric of exclusion as many LGBTQIA+ individuals migrate to the United States in search of safety from sexual persecution.

Ultimately, the construction of the wall was a failure and Congress refused to allocate the funds. Trump attempted to construct the wall through executive action and fewer than 500 miles were constructed. These 500 miles cost 15 billion dollars and the majority of miles were built in areas with already equipped barriers (Haberma). However, Trump had already accomplished his primary objective through the rhetoric surrounding the border wall construction. By hinging his campaign and presidency upon the wall and framing it as a solution to all immigration and

security concerns, Trump effectively mobilized his base and stoked fear among Americans, many of whom believed they were losing their privilege or majority status. The wall became the key symbol of protecting American interests and securing the borders, regardless of whether it was built or not.

Former President Trump's January 2019 speech on border security and the government shutdown employed divisive rhetoric that blamed migrants for societal issues and crime. Trump blamed the government shutdown on the "radical left" and their inability to build a wall along the Southern border. Trump stated, "Illegal immigration reduces wages and strains public services. The lack of border control provides a gateway, and a very wide and open gateway, for criminals and gang members to enter the United States, including the criminal aliens who murdered a brave California police officer only a day after Christmas" (Trump "Read: President Trump's Address"). Trump blamed the lack of social services and the job crisis on migrants and claimed that the lack of border control directly caused the death of innocent Americans, even those in the law and order sector. Here, Trump inseparably linked crime with migrants.

Trump implied that the prevalence of gangs, drugs, and murder, is all due to the lax immigration legislation, for which Democrats are directly responsible. Trump created a dichotomy between "angel moms," who are moral and trustworthy Americans, and "criminal aliens," who are immoral and violent migrants. Trump made use of common sense discourse based on dichotomies in the discussion about the wall. He stated, "This is a common-sense compromise both parties should embrace" (Trump "Read: President Trump's Address"). If Democrats were to oppose the wall, they would directly oppose the common sense that Trump has ingrained among his supporters which stated that migrants are dangerous. He claimed that "walls are not immoral" and quickly followed this with the argument that these borders will save

lives and stop drugs, however, he again failed to provide any type of research or statistics that back up this point, also ignoring the queer and trans migrants seeking asylum within the United States. Trump instead relied on Americans' ideas regarding the wall, the idealized safety they create, and the perceived attack on the nation. By framing the wall as the key aspect of his campaign, supporters were able to rally behind a tangible symbol of Trump's promises and vision for immigration reform and border security.

In order to garner support for his advocated border wall and justify his hateful rhetoric, Trump made use of exaggerated and inaccurate language that focused on crime, war, and sexual violence when discussing immigration. Rather than addressing specific cases, Trump labeled all migrants as criminals, manufacturing a culture of fear and misinformation. Trump stated that "ICE officers made 266,000 arrests of criminal aliens, including those charged or convicted of nearly 100,000 assaults, 30,000 sex crimes, and 4,000 killings or murders" (Viala-Gaudefroy). However, this statement is not only inaccurate, it has been disapproved by countless academic studies that show that illegal immigrants are less likely to break the law than US residents. Additionally, this framed migrants as "sexual predators" especially queer and trans migrants who already face stigma surrounding their sexuality.

Trump consistently framed migrants as sexual predators, drug dealers, and murderers, however, he failed to back up these statements with statistics, instead utilizing a common sense discourse of fear of racialized outsiders. Trump additionally stated that "One in three [immigrant] women is sexually assaulted [...] thousands of young girls and women [are] smuggled into the United States [to be sold] into prostitution and modern-day slavery" (Viala-Gaudefroy). Again, this claim has no evidence to back it up, however, Trump repeated this false statement ten times over his presidency. In the article, "How to Manufacture a Crisis:

Deconstructing Donald Trump’s Immigration Rhetoric,” Jérôme Viala-Gaudefroy explains that these statements do not need to be based on factual accuracy but rather on their ability to evoke strong emotional reactions, especially among conservative supporters. Viala-Gaudefroy argues that Trump positions himself as the solution to this crisis. Trump stated, “I pledge to you tonight that I will never abolish our heroes from ICE. [...] The proper wall never got built. I’ll get it built” (Viala-Gaudefroy). While the ICE officers are framed as the heroes, Trump is ultimately the defender of the nation’s physical and cultural integrity. By initially establishing clear villains to scapegoat and criminalize, Trump has effectively constructed both a problem and a solution: migrants are portrayed as the problem, while the wall represents the proposed solution. His supporters perceived him as the sole avenue towards achieving safety and economic prosperity within the United States.

Donald Trump’s roundtable discussion on Sanctuary Cities in March 2018 exemplified his use of fear-based rhetoric to vilify migrants. A Sanctuary City is a municipality that limits or denies its cooperation with the national government in enforcing immigration laws. Trump attempted to ingrain fear in American citizens by discussing the “poor morality” of migrants and insinuating that The Democratic party’s priority is to “protect criminals,” rather than United States citizens. Trump stated, “And in many cases, they are very bad actors. We have gang members; we have predators, rapists, killers—a lot of bad people” (Trump “Remarks at a Roundtable Discussion”). Trump claimed that “thousands of criminal aliens” are let out of prisons and rejoin communities, however, he refused to offer any statistics or research to back up this claim.

By equating almost all migrants to “bad actors” or criminals, Trump utilized common sense discourse based on fear and racism. By employing rhetoric that appeals to Americans’

emotions and fear surrounding crime rather than focusing on factual information, Trump was galvanizing support, without offering any substantive evidence. By speaking about the overall morality of migrants, Trump reasserted the importance of the nation, law and order, and the protection of Americans. Trump often politicized the issue by stating that Democrats prioritize criminals over their country. Rather Trump declared himself as “the defender of the United States,” and claimed that he will always put the American people first. Providing aid or safe passage to queer and trans migrants seeking asylum is depicted as “putting Americans second” rather than providing humanitarian assistance. He stated, “Democrats’ priority is to protect criminals, not to do what’s right for our country. My priority and the priority of my administration is to serve, protect, and defend the citizens of the United States” (Trump “Remarks at a Roundtable Discussion”). By creating a dichotomy in which one political party wants to harm Americans and one wants to protect them, Trump further polarized U.S. citizens and pushed the idea that migrants perpetrate crime and Americans are simply victims of the “liberal agenda” that prioritized equality over law and order.

Donald Trump’s August 2016 speech at the Phoenix Convention Center in Arizona exemplified how the border wall was positioned as a solution to securing the nation’s identity and security. Trump not only vilified migrants but the Democratic party and their inability to protect Americans. Trump stated, “Countless Americans who have died in recent years would be alive today if not for the open border policies of this administration and the administration that causes this horrible, horrible thought process, called Hillary Clinton” (Trump “Remarks on Immigration at the Phoenix”). Unlike Democrats, Trump will protect Americans from “dangerous migrants” who Clinton desperately wanted to include in our communities. He followed this statement with the claim that “most illegal immigrants are lower-skilled workers

with less education” (Trump “Remarks on Immigration at the Phoenix”). Therefore, according to Trump’s logic, not only are migrants committing violent crimes and harming American communities, but they are also placing a strain on the job market, social services, etc. By claiming that all migrants are “lower-skilled workers with less education,” Trump is further devaluing this population.

As mentioned previously, Trump claimed that in order to combat this influx of “dangerous criminal aliens” the first step is to build a wall along the Southern border which Mexico will pay for. Trump stated, “Together we can save American lives, American jobs, and American futures. Together we can save America itself. Join me in this mission, we’re going to make America great again” (Trump “Remarks on Immigration at the Phoenix”). Trump repeated the word “America” numerous times in this speech, emphasizing the importance of the nation and the ideals and culture of the United States. Trump argued that failing to protect our borders would not only lead to a geographical invasion but also a cultural one. For Trump, America and the ideals it stands for are under attack, therefore, the only logical and “common sense” approach is to enact a wall that will reassert the strength, power, and security of the United States.

Donald Trump’s February 2017 “Make America Great Again” rally in Florida showcased his use of coded language and nationalist rhetoric to depict migrants as threats to American safety and values while positioning himself as the defender of the nation. Trump discussed his promises of economic prosperity and critiqued the Democratic party, specifically Hilary Clinton. The rally began when Melania Trump led the group in prayer, reemphasizing the importance of religion, specifically Christianity, to the nation. Trump stated, “I know that you want safe neighborhoods where the streets belong to families and communities, not gang members and drug dealers who are right now, as I speak, being thrown out of the country, and they will not be

let back in. We will have strong borders again” (Trump “Remarks at a ‘Make America Great Again’ Rally in Melbourne”). Trump didn’t use the words “immigrant” or “alien” in this claim but ensured that his followers understood that when he stated, “gang members and drug dealers” he was talking about racialized migrants. Trump consistently employed dog whistles, which are coded or suggestive language employed to garner support from a particular group, without provoking the opposition. Even the phrase “Make America Great Again” can be read as a dog whistle as it implies reminiscing about a whiter, more heterosexual past.

He then stated that the American nation “remains the greatest symbol of liberty, of freedom, and justice on the face of God’s Earth” (Trump “Remarks at a ‘Make America Great Again’ Rally in Melbourne”). Here, Trump framed himself as the defender of the country, its religious values, and American citizens. He continued to argue that Democrats are not looking out for Americans, they are not ensuring a “level playing field.” Trump capitalized on white Americans’ anger regarding pushes for equality and their belief that due to their race, nationality, and sexuality, they deserve better treatment, opportunities, jobs, and lives than migrants, especially queer migrants of color. Trump continued, “We want people to come into our country, but we want people that love us. We want people that can cherish us and the traditions of our country. We want people that are going to be great for our country. We don’t want people with bad, bad ideas. We don’t want that” (Trump “Remarks at a ‘Make America Great Again’ Rally in Melbourne”). This statement suggests that Trump advocated for a narrow and exclusionary definition of who is deemed acceptable to enter the country. By emphasizing the need for immigrants to “love us” and “cherish us,” he implied that those who do not express affection for the United States and its traditions are undesirable and should not be allowed to emigrate. This exclusionary language perpetuated white supremacy and implied that immigrants who come

from different cultural backgrounds, hold different beliefs, or do not fit into the nuclear family structure may not be welcomed or accepted.

The “Remain in Mexico” policy, officially labeled the Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP), was implemented by the Trump administration in January 2019 and resulted in significant harm and human rights violations for migrants, especially queer and trans migrants. This policy required that asylum seekers who arrived at the U.S.-Mexico border wait in Mexico while their claims were being processed in U.S. immigration courts. The International Catholic Migration Commission (ICMC) states that “This directly violates the principle of non-refoulement, which forms the core of international law on protection and is a central aspect of the 1951 Refugee Convention.” The principle of non-refoulement prohibits any state from forcing asylum seekers to remain in a territory where they are at risk for harm or human rights violations. In the first year alone, 70,000 asylum seekers have been required to stay in Mexico, resulting in nearly 8,000 reported cases of kidnappings, sexual assaults, and other violent attacks while awaiting their asylum cases to be examined (International Catholic Migration Commission).

This policy disproportionately affected queer and trans migrants as they often face increased levels of violence and discrimination both in their native countries and while waiting for their claims to be processed in Mexico (NIF). Many queer and trans migrants seek asylum due to persecution based on their sexual orientation or gender and may encounter similarly hostile environments while waiting for asylum. The National Immigration Forum (NIF) states that “A Doctors Without Borders report found that 75% of migrants returned to Mexico under MPP had been a victim of an attempted kidnapping, and nearly 80% of migrants enrolled in MPP that were treated by an MSF mental health clinic at the border had been the victim of violence.”

President Joe Biden eventually repealed this program, yet its implementation resulted in highly negative and lasting consequences for vulnerable migrants.

Trump's signing of Executive Order 13769 in March 2017, commonly known as the travel ban, exemplified his administration's reliance on racist and discriminatory principles, reinforcing the narrative of American exceptionalism while ignoring systemic issues within the United States. This ban suspended the entry of immigrants from Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen for 90 days. This travel ban was not only based upon racist and discriminatory principles but it resulted in instant chaos. Airports were full of individuals who had been on airplanes when the order was passed and landed without any way of entering the country. Trump claimed that "it is the policy of the United States to protect its citizens from terrorist attacks, including those committed by foreign nationals" (Trump "Protecting the Nation"). Here, Trump's justification for the ban was rooted in the perceived need to protect American citizens from terrorist attacks, linking migrants from Middle Eastern countries to terrorism and making sweeping generalizations about Islamic faith and culture.

Trump claimed The United States cannot, and should not, admit those who do not support the Constitution, or those who would place violent ideologies over American law. By suggesting that Islamic ideology inherently promotes violence and is incompatible with American law, Trump perpetuated Islamophobia and stigmatized the Muslim community. In addition, Trump stated that "the United States should not admit those who engage in acts of bigotry or hatred (including 'honor' killings, other forms of violence against women, or the persecution of those who practice religions different from their own) or those who would oppress Americans of any race, gender, or sexual orientation" (Trump "Protecting the Nation"). Trump repeatedly emphasized the fact that Americans again must be protected from outsiders. He argued that the

culture, values, and ideals of America are under attack, therefore, the only way to protect them is through exclusion. Foreigners were depicted as not only criminals but terrorists, hellbent on dismantling the United States. While Trump cited the fact that individuals from Middle Eastern countries may oppress Americans based on race, gender, or sexual orientation, he failed to mention or even comprehend the ways in which the United States does exactly this. By separating and elevating itself from other countries, the United States is able to appear progressive and egalitarian.

Trump's policies and rhetoric exacerbated intersecting forms of oppression, further marginalizing queer and trans migrants. The strict immigration policies and legislation disproportionately impacted queer and trans migrants attempting to escape persecution in their native countries. Additionally, Trump's discourse excluded and criminalized migrants and perpetuated stereotypes about queer and trans individuals, leading to a culture of fear and unsafety for LGBTQIA+ immigrants. Trump's attempts to restrict access to healthcare and social services for migrants harmed queer and trans migrants who already face obstacles to accessing safe and affordable care. As mentioned in the introduction, the conditions within ICE facilities under the Trump administration posed threats to the safety of queer and trans migrants as there has been immense documentation on instances of physical and sexual harm (Chacón 225). This includes unsafe environments, denial of care, isolation, and discrimination which can result in mental and physical suffering and in some cases, even death. Overall, Trump's policies and discourse had devastating consequences for queer and trans migrants, perpetuating their marginalization and further exacerbating the violence and abuse they face.

Conclusion

A Look to the Future

I think the art that I create is for us. And by “for us,” I mean for other queer people, other undocumented people, other people of color, because I want to make art that other people can see themselves in.

–Julio Salgado, *KQED*, 2018

The mistreatment and harm experienced by queer and trans individuals persists regardless of the values or political leanings of the President in power, illustrating the enduring influence of heteronormativity and white supremacy. Addressing the ongoing injustices perpetrated directly under and by presidential rhetoric requires a reevaluation of border policies, including the opening of the U.S.-Mexico border and the closing of detention camps. In activist and scholar Justin Akers Chacón’s book, *The Border Crossed Us*, he argues that physical borders serve to repress people and enforce inequality. Chacón writes, “Racialized violence and inequalities intrinsic to border militarization and labor control through the manipulation of citizenship have been ongoing features of modern US capital accumulation, and have become more essential to its everyday functioning” (14). Detention centers are sites of systemic abuse, as evidenced by the prevalence of sexual and physical abuse inflicted upon children, women, men, and LGBTQ people within these facilities. Between the years 2010 and 2016, there have been over thirty-three thousand complaints of sexual assault or physical abuse, often by ICE agents (Chacón 225). However, less than one percent of these cases have been investigated, demonstrating a culture of mistreatment and violence, perpetuated by the United States government.

Regardless of claims of transformation within the immigration system, The Biden administration has continued to deny the majority of adult asylum seekers and maintained the act of holding children in detention centers. Chacón writes, “By the summer of 2021, this included holding over 21,000 children within an opaque network of over 200 facilities (including reactivated Trump-era camps) in over two dozen states, includes several Mega centers with more than a thousand children packed inside” (224). The act of caging children is fundamentally morally and legally wrong, however, it appears to be deemed acceptable when it involves racialized migrant children. There is an urgent need for a radical transformation in immigration policy and discourse.

Presidents hold the power to influence public opinion and enact institutional changes that prioritize care over punishment. However, systems of heteronormativity and white supremacy endure, enabling and normalizing the ongoing mistreatment of all migrants, especially queer and trans migrants. These oppressive systems are deeply entrenched within U.S. culture, traditions, and legislation, posing significant barriers to meaningful reform. Nevertheless, it is not without hope! Chacón argues that “it will take mass organizing and mobilizations, persistent campaigns over time, and the need to push the whole political establishment from below to close all of the detention camps” (228). Rethinking the immigration system requires a dismantling of oppressive systems through collective and radical action. In chapter two, Jennicet Gutiérrez’s “shameless interruption” of former President Barack Obama exemplifies this phenomenon. This interruption challenged the so-called “progressive” politics of the time and demanded liberation, rather than assimilation. Grassroots movements dedicated to radical change are essential to the transformation of the immigration system. While this paper may not delve into the efforts of these groups, listening to and supporting these movements is the first step toward actual

strategies and solutions for change. For example, the Undocuqueer movement works to create safe spaces and support networks for undocumented queer individuals, emphasizing solidarity and community building.

Julio Salgado, the co-founder of DreamersAdrift and the Migrant Storytelling Manager for The Center for Cultural Power, is a key leader in the Undocuqueer movement and uses art and social media to challenge current U.S. immigration policy. In the article, “Queering Citizenship: UndocuQueer and Immigration Reform,” Julio Salgado writes, “I use two identities that are supposed to make me weak and empower myself. As an undocumented person, I am seen as a criminal. As a queer person, I am seen as somebody who is going to hell. So how do you turn that [around]? For me, through the art, I turn that [around] by showing ourselves in dignified ways that embrace the terms that make us feel like we are less than human” (Dahms 81). Through visual storytelling and representation, Salgado reclaims his identity and challenges dehumanizing stereotypes. In his artwork “Undocumented and Awkward,” Salgado portrays his mother and sister, with the caption, “You backpacked across Europe and they called you adventurous. I crossed a border to save my daughter’s life and they call me a criminal” (Velazquez). This image demonstrates the double standards existing within the immigration system and how migrants are often criminalized for searching for better health care, wages, or safety for their children. Utilizing creativity and personal stories can be a powerful form of activism within queer and trans organizing. Social media allowed Salgado’s image to reach a broader audience, extending beyond traditional art spaces.

Queer and trans activism often involves building support and solidarity movements, especially in the context of seeking asylum in the United States. Arociris 17, also known as Rainbow 17, is a group of LGBTQIA+ migrants from Central America and Southern Mexico

who work to raise awareness about the unique struggles faced by queer and trans migrants and provide networks of support through legal aid, shelters, and advocacy groups. In Eithne Luibhéid and Karma R. Chávez's, *Queer and Trans Migrations: Dynamics of Illegalization, Detention, and Deportation*, the authors provide a collection of artwork and photographs of activists to demonstrate the lived experiences and resilience of queer and trans migrants. One of these images is a picture of two members of Arociris 17, Joselyn and Estefany. The photographer, María Inés Taracena writes that "I wanted to capture their expressions up close as a way to highlight their confidence and resistance—two virtues that are often ignored in the coverage of LGBTQI resistance in Central America and at the U.S.-Mexico border" (cited in Luibhéid and Chávez 9). While Joselyn and Estefany were sent to migrant detention centers, they were eventually released on parole and resettled on the West Coast. By refusing to adhere to normative gender roles and marching in front of the border fence, Arociris 17 engages in "shameless interruptions" which disrupt the entrenched narratives of exclusion perpetuated by societal norms and immigration policies.

It is evident that queer and trans migrants have been and continue to engage in forms of protest to fight against systemic oppression and violence based upon restrictive immigration policies and hateful rhetoric, therefore, this is the perfect place to start building momentum for change. By standing in solidarity and amplifying the voices and experiences of queer and trans migrants, we can work towards creating a more inclusive and equitable society for all, not only those most privileged. "Common sense" rhetoric based solely on fear and emotions only has power when people succumb to it. Therefore, if individuals critically examine and challenge these harmful discourses, they can make decisions based on reason and compassion rather than prejudice and hate. It is essential to understand the needs and the violence enacted upon queer

and trans migrants to dismantle these damaging narratives and rebuild a safer and more inclusive America, based upon true equality, rather than fear and exclusion.

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