Guest editorial

Breaking families: Whiteness, state violence, and the alienable rights of kin

The forcible separation of child migrants from their parents following the Trump administration’s April 2018 announcement of a “zero tolerance” policy became a spectacle of the terrorization of immigrant communities (Briggs, 2018). This intimate and racialized violence is foundational to US nationhood, with global implications, given the resurgence of the far-right. Geographers have engaged with the nation as an affective and embodied project. We augment this scholarship with theorizations of anti-Blackness, settler colonialism, and queer kinship to suggest that anti-migrant narratives service a white nation-state by projecting fear and apathy toward racialized others. We begin from the premise that US nationalism depends on the marginalization of non-whites and non-heteronorms through settler colonialism, racial capitalism, imperialism, and exclusionary immigration policies. We contribute to recent geographic scholarship on the operations of whiteness by attending to how territory and nation are constituted through the racialization of kinship. We argue that one way through which the (white) US nation-state is territorialized is the mechanism of denying childhood and kinship to racialized peoples in the name of “protecting” the white family. Performative apathy and cruelty enact the border onto racialized bodies, excluding migrant children and families from the nation, and sanctions violence by naturalizing their subordination in a racial hierarchy.

Discriminately applied to migrants traveling with children, the “zero tolerance” policy departed from previous practice of keeping families together. Instead, adults were jailed, while children were housed in makeshift camps run by the Office of Refugee Resettlement (such as a converted Walmart in Texas). Family separation is part of the “Border Spectacle,” in which asylum-seekers are produced as bogus migrants and migrants are created as an “illegal” class of people deserving expulsion (De Genova, 2013; de Vogue & Kopan, 2018), even as it is the Trump administration’s policies against migrants and asylum-seekers that have been demonstrated to be illegal.

In May 2018, as photographs of children crying in cages circulated, Jeff Sessions, then Attorney General, defended the policy: “If you are smuggling a child then we will prosecute you, and that child will be separated from you as required by law … If you don’t like that, then don’t smuggle children over our border” (Rhoden, 2018). The discourse of “smuggling” not only recalls racialized tropes of coyotes trafficking children across borders, but also breaks the bond between parents and children by describing parents as the “smugglers” of (what cannot then be) their own kin. Thus, vulnerable migrants, even children, are re-figured as a national security threat to justify the violence of family separation. This policy perversely recognizes the importance of family ties by seeking to destroy them in the name of deterring migration, sending a clear message that for some families, there is no security in the US.

The separation and subsequent demarcation of some kinship ties as “ineligible” (relegating some children to the foster care system) and the callous failure to maintain careful records connecting parents and children are manifestations of racial violence as policy—a policy that denies migrants’ humanity by denying their right to kinship. In references to policies that have targeted Native and Indigenous children, the Native American and Indigenous Studies Association has described the separation of these children at the border as “a new stolen generation” (Native American and Indigenous Studies Association, 2018).

Consider the lead plaintiff in the class action suit filed by the ACLU (de Vogue & Kopan, 2018). Ms. L and her daughter, from the Congo, arrived at a border port of entry and declared they were seeking asylum. Four days later, border patrol asked to speak to the six-year-old daughter alone. Ms. L could hear her daughter shouting for her help as Ms. L was informed she would be detained in San Diego and her daughter taken to Chicago. Her lawyer explains:

The government walked in, and even though everyone knew that they were separating children as what they believed would be a deterrent for future people coming, they came in and said, “Well we took the little girl away for her best interests.” And we said, “Really? Why is that? Why is it in the best interest this child to be whisked away?” And they said, “Well, by the time the mother got here from the Congo, she no longer had all her papers, so we couldn’t be sure it was actually the mother” (Interview with Scalise, 2018).

After a legal battle, DNA test, and seven months of separation, the mother and daughter were reunited (de Vogue & Kopan, 2018). Videos of reunifications, showing children’s trauma in their affectless avoidance of crying parents, are performatively shrugged off by Trump administration officials as a small price to pay for protecting the nation. A form of torture for children that will cause lasting damage, these separations are a component of a suite of Trump’s family-targeting policies, including those intended to end so-called “chain migration.” We see historical precedent for this policy in the removal of Indigenous children and In slavery’s destruction of Black familial ties. We raise three points to consider in contextualizing this crisis, and conclude by pointing to ways this analysis might be productive beyond the US case.

1. Who has the right to childhood?

Appeals to childhood as a universal are rooted in protecting white innocence, a privilege not afforded to children of color who are routinely hypercriminalized or incarcerated. The violent absurdity of toddlers representing themselves in court (Torres, 2018) parallels the racialization of Black boys like Tamir Rice and Trayvon Martin, as taller, heavier, dangerous adults and of Black girls, sexualized at young ages and blamed for their experiences of violence. Protecting all children would necessitate an overhaul of criminal justice and immigration, as
abolitionists and migrant activists have articulated (Gilmore, 2007; Kabu & Meiners, 2014; Loyd, Mitchelson, & Burridge, 2013).

In what contexts are children considered innocent and requiring protection? Which children? Whose? Migrant labor has historically separated children from families; yet this class-based division of labor, rather than soliciting white empathy, pathologizes migrant parents and naturalizes laborers’ suffering. It is crucial not to rely on the innocence of children to allocate empathy, nor to distinguish between exceptional “deserving migrants” (children, heroes, doctors) and unnecessary “illegal immigrants.” Parsing mobile people into such categories aligns an impossible spectrum of voluntary/involuntary migration with moral demarcations – “undeserving trespassers” versus “those who deserve rights and care from the state” (Holmes & Castañeda, 2016, p. 13) – and proliferates violence by valuing some people as more worthy of care, and hence, more human, than others.

2. Severing kinship ties to protect the fictive white nation state

Family separation’s dehumanizing logics sever ties between parents and children, in a haunting echo of the foundational racial violences that enabled the fictive kinship of the white nation state. The theft of children through residential schools and assimilationist policies lies at the heart of settler colonialism’s campaign to hollow out Turtle Island’s ancestral content, knowledge, languages, and community life, in order to fill up both land and bodies with European whiteness (Briggs, 2018; Dunbar-Ortiz, 2017). As argued by Brown and Estes (2018), residential schools “were key to the U.S. government’s project of destroying Indigenous nations.” This genocidal logic persists in the ongoing erasure of Indigenous life through the foster care system’s overpopulation with Indigenous children taken from their communities, violence against Indigenous women, disproportionate police violence targeting Indigenous men, and in DNA sciences used to undermine tribal sovereignty claims (Reardon & TallBear, 2012).

The scenes of family separation immediately recalled transatlantic slavery’s project of natal alienation (Holden, 2018), as the theft of children was key to breaking kinship, ancestral and parental connections in order to destroy social life and render people into property (Spillers, 2003). Anti-Black violence manifests in forced sterilization’s denial of reproductive rights, reproduced in foster care and incarceration alike, and in the carceralization of urban spaces that destroy Black family life (Roberts, 2014; Shubasz, 2015). Collins (2004, p. 4) describes white supremacy as a “white family,” without empathy for Black people who are “no kin” to them. Patriarchal white supremacy’s hallmark is its insistence on the power of those embodying whiteness to dictate who gets to have ancestors and who gets to have children.

3. Intentional apathy and racial abjection

The cruelty directed at brown migrant children is part of a performative apathy that shore up whiteness through a devaluation of other bodies represented as threat, or as naturally abject. We read the Trump family’s public performances through this lens. Days after the story broke, Ivanka Trump posted an Instagram photo of herself and her son (in pajamas, in her arms) with the caption “my [emoji heart].” Melania Trump was photographed wearing a jacket (on a warm day) with “I really don’t care, do u?” written on the back – en route to visit migrant children. Even if unintentional, these public proclamations, combined with policy, represent a celebration of white family and mother-child love, reiterating racial purity at the very moment of public outcry about the mistreatment of racialized migrant families.

Silva (2018: 79) observes that “white-bred dreams of citizenship and nation-making” rely on “white reproduction as central to consolidating power,” through love as cruelty. Silva argues that “love” of (white) family is at the center of violence that is portrayed by the current administration as “misguided patriotism,” resulting in cruelty, hate crimes, or human rights abuses. Thus, while pardoning Joe Arpaio for civil immigration violations, Trump explained, “Sheriff Joe is a patriot. Sheriff Joe loves our country,” his anti-immigrant violence masquerading as “nation-making love” (Silva, 2018: 83). As migrant-directed apathy plays out in the public sphere, Ivanka and Melania signal where care must be directed.

The protection of white bodies and concomitant violence against those who are Black and Brown is central to racial categorization, entangled in representations of white experiences of violence as remarkable, and violent conditions for Black and Brown people as ordinary (Kobayashi & Peake, 2000). What is at stake is the embodiment of race and gender through violence, tautologically justified because the same people are repeatedly targeted by that violence: thus, violence against migrants becomes naturalized as the inevitable fate of “illegal” people (Holmes & Castañeda, 2016). The direction of love toward the deserving white child is, in Spillers’s (2003, p. 218), terms, “the vertical transfer of a bloodstream, of a patronymic, of titles and entitlements, of real estate and the prerogatives of ‘cold cash,’ from fathers to sons and in the supposedly free exchange of affectional ties between a male and a female of his choice.” Family thus defined, “becomes the mythically revered privilege of a free and freed community.”

4. An agenda for political geographers

As political geographers, what might we learn from this ongoing crisis, and what analytic tools might we bring to bear? We encourage geographers to engage feminists of color analyses that demonstrate how whiteness is constructed through fictive kinship and destroying or appropriating Black, Brown, Native, and migrant kinship (e.g. Collins, 2004; Reardon & TallBear, 2012; Roberts, 2014). These analyses further political geographic scholarship by taking kinship and families as central to the affective and embodied production of territory, borders, and nation-states. We also ought to attend to the labor through which kinship is recovered and sustained for survival and building a future (e.g. Brown & Estes, 2018; Smiles, 2018). We direct attention to revolutionary mothering and moves to queer kinship (e.g. Gumbs, Martens, & Williams, 2016), and to political struggles centering Indigenous people’s rights to self-determine what it means to be related (e.g. Dennison, 2012; Leroux, 2018). We also ask ourselves on what basis we demand justice: the rhetoric of “what if it was your child,” upholds colorblind celebrations of the nuclear family, and fails to queer normative structures of caring (Goswin, 2012).

We encourage geographers to extend work on the abolition of borders, cages, and prisons by highlighting the coalitional possibilities (Chávez, 2013) of linking Native, Black, Brown, and marginalized migrant struggles, articulated in messages like “No ban on stolen land” (e.g., Mays, 2016, see also the Red Nation Manifesto). We see echoes of racialization and dehumanization in the “refugee crisis,” in Europe and elsewhere (e.g., De Genova, 2013; Loyd et al., 2013), and suggest that resonant analyses could emerge from contextual grounding in relation to European understandings of race (Bialasiewicz, 2006), whiteness and territoriality (Nayak, 2010), and in the global far-right turn We close by asking geographers to dismantle the social and political life of these racial logics by enacting fugitivity (Harney & Moten, 2013) as researchers and educators.

Conflicts of interest

None.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2019.01.001.
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