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Milwaukee's Hostile Terrains

9/20/2021

By Madison Williams

During the Spring 2021 semester, I was given the opportunity to intern with Professor Maria Novotny on conducting community-based research centered on reproductive justice in Milwaukee. Ultimately, the goal of our research was to curate an art installation for UW-Milwaukee's *Hostile Terrains* exhibition. The *Hostile Terrains* exhibition at UWM, which will take place at the Emile H. Mathis Art Gallery and opens at the end of September, will visually explore the ways in which space, policy, and power emerge in and around Milwaukee.

Through a collection of research-based art installations, *Hostile Terrains* hopes to draw attention to the issues of social justice embedded in the material culture and physical environment of our community. UWM faculty, students, and community partners will explore these themes from a variety of perspectives, including African American, Native American, and Latinx communities, through individual exhibits focused on Milwaukee.

Hostile Terrain 94: The Catalyst

The catalyst for this exhibition at UWM was the global participatory art exhibition [Hostile Terrain 94 \(HT94\)](#), which was designed by archeologist Dr. Jason De Leon to memorialize the lives of thousands of migrants who died attempting to cross the U.S.-Mexico border through the Sonoran Desert of Arizona over the past 30 years. Sponsored and organized by the [Undocumented Migration Project \(UMP\)](#), HT94 is composed of over 3,200 handwritten toe tags geolocated on a wall map of the desert in the exact place where individual remains were found. In order to globally memorialize the thousands of migrants who lost their lives in the Sonoran Desert, as well as raise awareness about the death and suffering migrants have experienced as a direct result of the U.S. Border Patrol policy known as "[Prevention Through Deterrence](#)" since its implementation in 1994, the installation will be displayed simultaneously in locations around the globe in 2021.

Milwaukee's Hostile Terrains

In a conversation with [David Pacifico](#)—the Director of UWM's Emile H Mathis Gallery and coordinator of this exhibition—he explained how *Hostile Terrains* at UWM aims to take the basic questions focused on in HT94 and apply them to local contexts and communities in Milwaukee. When asked about the development of the UWM exhibit's local focus, Pacifico recalled: "The pre-pandemic team of students pointed out that the intersection of space, policy, and violence at the [U.S.-Mexico] border also plays out for African American people, Native People, Women, and myriad other groups" in various locations and contexts across Milwaukee. He continued, "For example, we're lately directed to think about anti-Asian violence in the time of Covid and to recall the long history of anti-Asian policy and action in the US." Pacifico hopes that this exhibit will make the otherwise invisible, politicized, and even actively ignored problems experienced by specific communities in Milwaukee visible to the wider public, while also helping visitors find

common ground within these polarizing topics.

To address the exhibit's focus on the big themes and questions, Pacifico and his team reached out to UWM faculty who could adequately address them for populations near to home.

The *Hostile Terrains* exhibition will feature art installations that explore topics including, but not limited to:

- Space, policy, and protest among African Americans in Milwaukee
- The context of space and place for Native American people in Milwaukee
- Places of reproductive (in)justice in Milwaukee
- Relationships between Covid, place, and justice
- Latinx experiences in the context of Milwaukee as a hostile terrain

The faculty members researching these issues are each working with their own teams and partners as a means of opening the gallery space to many community, student, and faculty collaborators.

Reproductive (In)Justice in Milwaukee

As part of this larger exhibition, the project I've been working on with Maria, and two other graduate students, aims to shed light on Milwaukee's multiple reproductive health crises. Issues of reproductive justice in Milwaukee disproportionately impact communities of color, and our project situates Milwaukee as a hostile terrain for those in need of reproductive healthcare services. Our research aims to examine the inequities Milwaukee citizens face in accessing affordable, safe, and knowledgeable reproductive healthcare.

Reproductive justice, which [SisterSong](#) defines "as the human right to maintain personal bodily autonomy, have children, not have children, and parent the children we have in safe and sustainable communities," anchors the scope and goals of this project. The hostile terrains surrounding access to reproductive healthcare in Milwaukee pose a multitude of challenges, and potential consequences, for individuals in our communities. Given these challenging realities, we hope to assemble a participatory and community-driven exhibition by creating a space for the otherwise invisible, and often silenced, voices in our community to be heard.

Over the next few weeks, as the opening of the Hostile Terrains exhibition on September 30th approaches, we will be publishing several posts centered on Hostile Terrains and the research being done by the UWM students and faculty contributing to it.

Visit *Hostile Terrains* at UWM

The *Hostile Terrains* exhibition opens at [UWM's Emile H. Mathis Art Gallery](#) (located in Mitchell Hall, Rm 170) on September 30, 2021, with an opening reception taking place from 5-7PM. The exhibit will run through February 10, 2022. The exhibition can be visited during the gallery's normal operating hours, Monday-Thursday from 10AM to 4PM, free of charge. Appointments can be made to visit the exhibit outside of these hours by contacting the gallery at: mathisartgallery@uwm.edu.