For my Reproductive Rights Activist Service Corps summer internship, I worked as a program assistant for the National Network for Immigrant and Refugee Rights (NNIRR), located in Oakland, CA. Supervised by its executive director, Catherine (Cathi) Tactaquin, this opportunity allowed me to immerse myself in a progressive non-profit that is dedicated to the promotion and protection of human rights and justice for displaced peoples around the world, although its main focus tends to naturally fall back to policy and advocacy in the United States. Flying into San Francisco, I honestly did not know what to expect from the organization. Skimming through its website didn’t reveal much about NNIRR and how exactly it carries out its work: would it be a grassroots, action-oriented group, more of a policy-writing, research one, or an advocacy, campaign-oriented non-profit? I eventually learned more about the true nature of this dynamic organization (a mix between all that I expected), the importance of its work, and how effective it’s been in adapting to the changing priorities and needs of the pro-immigrant movement since its foundation in 1986. NNIRR advocates for immigrant and refugee rights, empowers other organizations and individuals, is involved in international immigration discussions, and serves as an educational resource, changing its work and strategies each year.

When the time finally came to go to the office, I dressed in ambiguously-business casual clothes and was given a tour and an intern orientation. I was explained my main responsibilities: news monitoring and daily update of the organization’s website and social media, as well as the research and development of a toolkit for NNIRR’s newest endeavor on combatting border militarization, the Border Policy Toolkit. In the context of the ongoing debate around U.S. immigration reform, the endless securitization of the country’s U.S.-Mexico border has been utilized as a political trade-off, the mainstream rationale seemingly being that immigrant rights can only be nationally guaranteed if the borders are sealed shut tight by drones, impenetrable fences, ludicrous corporate contracts, hordes of military units, and full freedom of enforcement for those who would dare to cross. This year, NNIRR thus decided to focus its attention at finding ways to
prevent the U.S. government to intensify the (already secure) border, which has been elevated to the status of a ‘national security concern’ and a physical war zone. However, for NNIRR this doesn’t only mean fighting the border’s military budget, but also the terrible policies related and caused by national anti-immigrant obsessions. Initially, I didn’t receive much information regarding the creation of the Border Policy Toolkit, with my only project being to find sources that related to the topic and create a literature review based on what I found. I plunged into this activity, reporting to Cathi after I had made progress on it. Because of the lack of guidance, it was somewhat difficult to figure out exactly what this document was expected to look like, but after listening to Cathi’s feedback and suggestions, and asking for clarification as I worked on it, I realized what she wanted me to produce. In retrospect, creating this document served as a great introduction to the campaign I would be helping NNIRR with. I had to write short synopses for the different sources that I found, so I quickly starting picking concepts, facts and terminologies that would later be very useful in the development of the toolkit itself. Plus, with Cathi’s critical comments and input, I slowly identified NNIRR’s stance towards the different themes that arose in my research.

Alongside this first project, I continuously monitored different online news resources to find stories, articles, reports and documents that are relevant to NNIRR’s scope of work so I could update the organization’s website and social media. It was challenging to figure out exactly what kinds of pieces I had to find and which publications to use, but I soon developed a personal system, the process eventually becoming easier and a part of my daily routine at work. Initially, I would send Cathi a list of the different pieces I would find for her to check out and approve, but she eventually gave me more trust and independence as she realized I understood what she was looking for. Her feedback made me reflect a lot on the prevalence of bipartisanship, political paralysis, and obvious bias in mainstream media, so I had to be careful and very critical when reading through the news. It was no surprise that the most useful and insightful stories came from independent sources or other advocacy organizations. By the middle of the summer, I was performing the news monitoring by myself, receiving suggestions or stories that I’d miss from Cathi throughout the week.

After doing substantial progress on the literature review, I began creating a document that provided a summary of data regarding the increase of spending on border enforcement and the resulting deaths of border-crossers after 9/11. It took me a while to find the correct federal websites for the budgetary information, but once I found one document, the rest were pretty straightforward to locate. In terms of border deaths, it is tremendously difficult to account for the exact number of deceased migrants in the borderlands: the only accessible numbers are of bodies found and officially reported in the U.S. side of the border, and these vary greatly depending on the organization. The finished document, titled The Border: Enforcement as a Weapon, can be accessed through this link: https://docs.google.com/document/d/168gZS9UW3K4JRLdp9OjuT-ouLE-gtpahHTzG3xZNK2tI/edit?usp=sharing.

Once I finished this report, I had a longer conversation with Cathi about the Border Policy Toolkit and how I was to develop it. Based on the different themes I found in my literature review, we brainstormed the different sections for the toolkit, which
would be an online resource for individuals and organizations to freely access. I did extra research after we finalized brainstorming the different sections, particularly looking for images, graphs, websites, and additional data for the toolkit. As mentioned, the work I had done with the literature review helped me a lot in the development of the toolkit, as it provided me with plenty of background knowledge on the topic, as well as sources to refer to. I had already received a crash-course on the platform NNIRR uses for its website, Drupal, but it was definitely challenging to keep the toolkit readable and organized (as well as aesthetically pleasing); I had to refresh my HTML knowledge and play around with the platform to get the best results. I constantly updated the website as I found more up-to-date information and reports on border militarization and enforcement, so I kept this project going until the very end of my internship, alongside the daily news monitoring. During my time at NNIRR, the mainstream media put its spotlight on what was coined a ‘humanitarian crisis’ in the U.S.-Mexico border, with most of the focus on the huge spike of unaccompanied minors from Central America entering the country. The children and their families were fleeing their countries for their lives, becoming de facto refugees, as well as political tools for bipartisan wars in the United States. Because of these events, NNIRR had to rethink a lot of its planned work and attention, dedicating a large section of the Border Policy Toolkit to the border refugee crisis to offer updates and critical analyses; I contributed to this aspect as well. However, what this meant was that NNIRR leadership and affiliated organizations did not have time to come to a consensus on what actions it would push forward or endorse to combat border militarization. This led to the Border Policy Toolkit to have its last ‘actions’ section incomplete. Nevertheless, my work during the summer laid a strong and thorough foundation to NNIRR’s new campaign, which can be accessed through this link: http://www.nnirr.org/drupal/campaign-border-justice

My RRASC internship was extremely rewarding for me, professionally, personally, and academically. I gained a significant amount of knowledge about the status of immigrant rights in the country and abroad through my research and daily work. In terms of highlights of my summer, I had the opportunity to be involved in mass naturalization workshops organized in San Francisco and Oakland. These day-long, volunteer-run events help permanent residents who can qualify for U.S. citizenship to go through the process with guidance and translation services at no cost. Given that I speak Spanish, I helped in the different steps of the process as volunteers were needed, allowing me to not only learn more about the immigration infrastructure of the United States, but also interact with migrants experiencing the myriad of processes and obstacles involved in the system, along with experienced immigration and refugee lawyers. Almost every week, Cathi also let me know of (and encouraged me to participate in) different conference calls on immigration, which ranged from monthly reports of pro-immigrant advocacy in California to formal informational phone conferences for the media. This allowed me to greatly expand my scope and perspective on immigration, while learning about the different ways organizations around the state and country were engaging with the different legal, political and technical issues that are negatively affecting immigrants and refugees in the country. Through NNIRR, I also attended a small press conference on the children refugee crisis,
hosted by the East Bay Youth Coalition (EBYC, an Oakland-based, undocumented youth activist organization). This opportunity allowed me to connect with EBYC and attend some of their meetings, as well as a concert they would be tabling at of a fantastic Los Angeles band, Las Cafeteras.

During the last week of my internship, a national grassroots environmental conference took place in Richmond, CA, called Our Power National Convening. Revolving around the theme of just, community-based environmental transitions, Cathi invited me to attend during the last day of my internship, giving an amazing end to my RRASC experience. Surrounded by extremely critical and experienced grassroots activists around the country, I delved into the complex intersections between migrant rights and other social justice movement, as well as the importance of having a holistic approach when doing this type of working and organizing. As I’ve stated several times, my RRASC internship gave me countless valuable learning experiences. My mental frameworks have definitely shifted and become more critical and aware. At Hampshire College, I am studying the complications and levels of oppression behind the transnational Arab and Latin American identities, and my time at NNIRR allowed me to reflect on the ways immigration policy and the security systems embedded in it interact with my areas of study. In fact, I am leaning to shift my studies into questions of how brown bodies from Latin America are categorized as ‘illegal’ and ‘undocumented,’ while their counterparts from the Middle East and North Africa are deemed ‘terrorists’ and ‘threats.’ These ideological conceptualizations are violently reflected in immigration enforcement systems in the United States and Europe, and I might explore them in my future studies. In terms of my career path, engaging with NNIRR has undoubtedly increased my interest in pro-immigrant work. I received exposure to different fields that I am interested in, such as non-profit work, United Nations careers, international law, and legal services for immigrants and refugees. Although I am still unsure of exactly what I’d like my career to be (which is completely normal for a third year student at a Liberal Arts school), being a part of NNIRR got me thinking more about this question and what it is that I am most passionate about.

All in all, I loved my internship at the National Network for Immigrant and Refugee Rights. Throughout the entire summer, and particularly due to the attention given to the refugee children crossing the border, I found myself repeatedly thinking about the intersections of the reproductive rights umbrella and justice for migrants. Deportation and immigration proceedings split families, crush familial organizations, and destroy livelihoods, infringing on the reproductive rights of individuals whose only crime was to cross a border or evade immigration policy. Given the culture of migrant families, and the way men of color in particular are vulnerable to migratory enforcement and displacement, women must often confront most of the burden imposed by immigration systems, directly affecting their ability to work, reproduce, have a family, and freely move.

However, in retrospect, what would I have done differently during my time working for NNIRR and living in the Bay Area? I would have definitely gotten more involved with the community, seeking opportunities to engage with it since the beginning of my summer. I only started attending EBYC meetings near the end of my time in the
Bay Area, and although I did volunteer for the naturalization workshops and San Francisco’s annual AIDS walk, I regret not having spent more of my free time in meaningful activities, with local individuals and organizations doing direct impact work. I did try to find different organizations with which to get involved, but I absolutely could have been more perseverant. If I could give advice to future interns, it would be to never say no to any opportunity. Whenever my supervisor or friends in the area proposed a plan, I would always say yes, and I don’t regret any of them. Because it was a totally new environment, I had to stay open for new experiences if I wanted to make the best of it. I would also recommend attempting to get involved with the community early in the summer: it might be awkward or intimidating to do so, but this is something that I do regret. If you have extra time, look for ways to invest it in things that you are passionate about, because you get a lot back from volunteering, even though the work can sometimes be hard or stressful.

More information on the RRASC internship program: clpp.hampshire.edu/RRASC