Comparative Migration Studies

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Innocence and danger at the border: migrants, "Bad" mothers, and the nation's protectors

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Abstract

Media and political discourse in the USA often depict migration as an invasion and people who cross borders as criminals dangerous to the nation. Through ethnographic fieldwork conducted in two places on the USA-Mexico Southern border, we want to analyze how invasion narratives influence practices on-the-ground. We first explore how these narratives inform the views of a border militia who see themselves as protectors of the nation and understand people who cross borders as threats. We then argue that migrant women's presence in areas where the militia operates disrupts the dominant narrative that defines migrants as dangerous, as militia members come to understand migrant women as victims of the Cartel. Despite their innocence, to maintain the narrative's consistency, militia members still consider migrant women criminals for crossing the border "illegally." Finally, we move on to explore the materiality of these xenophobic discourses by examining how migrant women are mistreated at a family immigration detention center. Using the militias as an example, we highlight why political narratives circulate and have meaning for individuals and how discourses have material consequences.

Keywords: Migration, Militias, Asylum, Refugees, Asylum, Political affect

"We have an invasion of drugs and criminals coming into our country"
President Donald Trump. February 15, 2019

The shade of the mesquite trees lining the dried-up creek bed offered little respite from the harsh sunlight. The light breeze went some way toward comfort, but a mile from the US-Mexico border in the Sonoran Desert, discomfort was standard. John had asked Allan (all participants' names are pseudonyms), an armed border militia volunteer, if he would walk away from the militia and the desert if he thought violence was a real possibility:

> *No. You can't. That's why [Cartels] are violent. That's why they cut people's heads off: torture. All that. That's why they do that, and that's why they have such a strong grip on their country; it's fear. So the second I let that violence affect me...you've let 'em [sic] win.*

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Allan was not naïve to violence, but in the deserts of Arizona and the hostile wilderness that surrounded us, he was aware the likelihood of seeing any Cartel member, let alone interacting with them, was close to zero. Yet, here he was, away from his wife and four kids, patrolling the border with the 16 heavily armed men of Border Watch—a composite of three militias—worried that violent individuals were crossing the border and endangering US families.

This paper explores the ways narratives circulate and provide meaning among different groups. Guiding this paper is the desire to understand how individuals localize these narratives to make sense of their experiences and influence their practices on-the-ground. We analyze how narratives—such as Allan's—can be a powerful motor to, for instance, create groups such as border militias and/or result in the mistreatment of those who seek asylum. We argue that invasion narratives inform the views of the militias at the border in two ways: 1. How they understand themselves as protectors of the nation; 2. How they view people who cross the Southern border as threats to the (white) nation. In this scenario, migrant women pose a threat to the simplicity of the narrative as they occupy a dual position: criminals for entering the nation undocumented; and victims of the Cartel's violence. Despite their disruption to the narrative, migrant women still end up being understood as criminals who break the law. We conclude the paper with a short examination of migrant women's experience in a family detention center to highlight the breadth and diversity of local expressions of invasion narratives and the material consequences for those they describe. Rather than explaining how detainment and security policies were adopted, we want to highlight that in this paper we deal with how people adapt broader narratives to their local contexts to make sense of their experiences and, in turn, justify their participation in enforcing the border regime.

This article is an important contribution to Critical Border and Migration Studies—and, in particular, to the literature on demonizing narratives of migrants. It emphasizes how violence is exercised through rhetoric and constitutive of bordering technologies. Given that such narratives continue to be mobilized with political purposes and transformed into dehumanizing practices such as confinement, it is important to persist in documenting their effects and the ways in which these narratives are articulated among and by different groups. Rather than privileging an understanding of power as totalizing, we aim to shift the focus to the complex and interconnected ways women are understood from different locations. In this paper, we center how heteronormative understandings of women in general, and migrant women in particular, permeate the dominant anti-immigrant discourse. Even though this is not directly addressed in this paper, we recognize spaces for resistance, the creation of alternative subjectivities, and the performance of political belonging outside traditional notions of citizenship that other authors have dealt with (see for instance, Papadopoulos et al., 2008; Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013; Welander, 2021). We focus on the narratives articulated by border militia members at the border that are connected to dominant narratives of women of color and invasion. As barometers of anti-immigrant affect, the ease with which border militias dismiss contradictions to narratives is critical in understanding the consequences xenophobic narratives have on migrant women.

We begin by placing the invasion narrative in context and follow it with a short introduction to political affect as a theoretical lens. Second, we introduce Border Watch

and briefly discuss our methods and the implications of our research. Third, we examine how Border Watch employs the invasion narrative on the border. We demonstrate how border militias make use of invasion narratives to posit themselves as protectors of the nation and migrants as criminals. Fourth, we tease apart the contradictions that migrant women represent by showing the complex position they occupy in the narrative: innocent victims of the Cartels and "bad" mothers who put their children's lives at risk by "illegally" crossing the border. Through research conducted in a family detention center, we briefly illustrate the consequences that racist rhetoric has on women who seek asylum. We use women—specifically mothers—as an illustrative example of how actors use the invasion narrative to criminalize and dehumanize migrants through speech acts and detention enforcement. Our discussion concludes by arguing that these dehumanizing narratives reflect the depoliticization of a migration system that focuses exclusively on the victims of violence, i.e., migrants, rather than the root causes of displacement. These narratives become the necessary condition to revictimize those who seek asylum through brutal practices—such as confinement, deportation, and/or incarceration.

Framing the border

> *"Until we get a handle on the invasion, maybe the military should handle rounding up illegals and protecting the border," Terry, border militia supporter on Facebook, 2017*

According to US Customs and Border Protection (2023), 162,317 individuals entered the country between ports of entry along the Southwest border in March 2023. Some of the conditions that have driven this population to leave are poverty, insecurity, criminality, and gang violence. These causes of migration are tightly connected to the US' imperialist military intervention, land dispossession, environmental degradation, war on drugs, and neoliberal-oriented development projects (Sassen, 2014). Those who choose not to flee—themselves and their families—experience high levels of violence, often risking their lives simply by staying. Similarly, those who decide to cross the border go through the dangers of the journey to then (often) find themselves confined in a detention center. Throughout the twentieth century, political leaders, news outlets, and citizens in the USA have defined migration, and specifically South-Northward migration, as an invasion (Chavez, 2008b). The strategic use of xenophobic and securitization political rhetoric posits refugees as a threat to the country and has led to an increasing militarization and proliferation of borders (Chacón & Coutinn 2018; Mountz & Hiemstra, 2014; Vaughan-Williams, 2015). Concepts and words like flood, hordes (Friese, 2017), invasion (Haddad, 2007; Mamadouh, 2012), pollution (Hall, 2012; Speltini & Passini, 2014), dirtiness, germs, insects, and infestation have been used metaphorically in connection with "undesirable" populations—specifically non-white populations or less desirable white populations recast as non-white—such as foreigners (Catalano & Musolff, 2019).

Anti-immigrant concern in the USA is largely focused on the US-Mexico border and those who cross it undocumented. Violence has been a staple since the border's inception, rising and falling in different political climates as concerns over who belongs on either side have often materialized through aggression (Yoxall, 2006). While not new, Donald Trump's efforts to link a variety of crimes to undocumented migration using the

notions of danger, innocence, and invasion heightened latent anxieties among many US citizens (Lechuga, 2017). The effect of this rhetoric cannot be understated. On August 9, 2019, an armed white US citizen entered a Walmart in El Paso, killed 23 people and injured a further 23. Shortly before beginning his murderous rampage, the shooter posted the following statement on an internet site: "This attack is a response to the Hispanic invasion of Texas." In his manifesto, *The Inconvenient Truth* (Crusius, 2019), he argues that his "European comrades" had been overrun by "millions of invaders that plague their country [sic]." He thus saw his actions as "faultless" because they were an act of "preservation" against the danger of ethnic and cultural migration. While this event represents a relatively uncommon expression of anti-immigrant sentiment, the underlying themes prompting his actions lead to less sinister but equally troubling events that regularly occur. Every year, hundreds of US citizens head to the USA-Mexico border armed and camouflaged to "protect" the nation from an invasion. Carrying names such as Arizona Border Recon, the Minutemen, United Constitutional Patriots, and the Three Percent United Patriots, these militias respond to calls like Trump's to defend the nation from "foreign criminals," "rapists," and "murderers." They are an expression of a popularized national sentiment that defines migrants as criminals and their undocumented entry into the USA as an invasion. The economic disparity between the USA and its Southern neighbors has led to a history of Northbound migration, making the prevalence of an invasion myth tied to race, a key feature of immigration policy and debate.

Exploring the Minutemen militia, a predecessor of the militias we discuss here, Katie E. Oliviera (2011) defines the group's desire and attempt to inflame and incite racial, gendered, and national anxieties that are then translated into public policy as political affect. In turn, Michael Lechuga (2017) traces the sway and usage of this tactic from the Minutemen to Donald Trump's rhetoric and how that helped him secure the 2016 US presidential election. In their papers, both Oliviero and Lechuga highlight the gendered aspect of the immigration debate that posits a US feminized nation in danger of an external masculine threat. For these authors, the invasion myth played a critical role in the Minutemen militia and Trump's attempt to bring to life their idea of the nation-state. Political affect, in this sense, acts as a means to convince and sway the listeners of the myth. Any dismissal of contradictions to the narratives derives from a rational decision to maintain the affective power. A quick glance at the reception of Trump's prolonged invasion narratives among his supporters will show a dismissal of any consistency issues. And it is this aspect we are interested in: the acceptance of narratives despite their obvious contradictions.

Following Lechuga and Oliviero, we turn to political affect. In *Moving Politics*, Deborah Gould describes affect as a force "bursting with potential" that gives sensory experience intensity and "prepares the organism to respond to that which is impinging on it, but in no predetermined direction" (Gould, 2009, 20). In this view, Gould centers on a distinction between affect and emotion. The former, she argues, corresponds to a body's movement through the world, affected by and affecting other bodies. The body registers the affect and can either be augmented or diminished. The registration need not be conscious but sensorial, and in that experience, it prepares to respond in a myriad of ways. Emotion, in Gould's conception, is the attempt to make sense of the sensory experience and draws from a range of culturally available material, including prior experience,

narrative, and myth. The need to make sense of affect, sensorial experience, feelings, and change creates potential responses. Set within a particular conception of the state, nationalism, gender, and racial ideologies, the potential responses become defined and directed to certain potentials, such as the militarization of the border and the existence of border militias. Important for our purposes here, Brian Massumi (2015) argues that the affective element bypasses the rational as it plays on fear and emotion. For example, troops can be committed to war because it makes a population feel safe and proud of their nation, "not because the leader is able to present well-honed arguments that convince the population that it is a justified use of force" (31). Detractors of the invasion myth may point to irrational elements and contradictions in the narrative, but the affective power and emotional connection outweigh these elements, as it helps many make sense of their sensorial experiences. In our case, the contradictory element in the invasion narrative (such as women migrants understood as both innocent and dangerous) is thus dismissed.

Methods

We define border militias as a subset of the militia movement in the USA. Many militias are primarily interested in supporting state emergency services, from assisting natural disaster relief to defending a potential foreign "invasion." In this paper, "Border Watch" is a composite of three militias that described themselves as a surveillance organization with a focus on stopping narcotics from entering the USA through the Sonoran Desert. Throughout the year, members living along the border maintained records on suspected migrant trails, humanitarian water drops, and general activity utilizing motion detection cameras and walking the routes themselves. Border Watch relied on donations of equipment, money, and time. Hundreds supported the militia, but only a select few were given permission to join the operations conducted up to six times a year. In these operations, an average of 20 volunteers spent their own money and time camping at the border in the hopes of locating undocumented migrants and, according to militia members, reporting them to Border Patrol. The members applied to join the operations by filling out a simple form and completing a police background check. Due to the perceived nature of their goal—"combating Cartels" in remote regions of the USA—experience with firearms and general outdoor skills were a necessity. As a result, Border Watch valued military or law enforcement backgrounds, which limited the number of women meeting the criteria. Unsurprisingly, the operations were a masculine space. All volunteers were USA or naturalized citizens (from Europe, North, Central, and South America). While the majority of volunteers were white, a number of non-white volunteers, including Native Americans, attended the operations. Border Watch members adhered to a historically inspired notion of the citizen-soldier that deemed it was their moral duty to protect the nation and its citizens, particularly those unable or unwilling to defend it themselves—women, children, and "liberals" (Parsons, 2020, 2023). The defining feature of Border Watch was their continued effort despite their near complete lack of direct interaction with migrants. This contradiction hints toward the narratives' resilience despite the lack of evidence for its veracity (for further discussion see Parsons, 2023).

John Parsons spent 11 months between 2017 and 2018 with Border Watch as they patrolled the USA-Mexico border in the Sonoran Desert. His research project involved

participant observation with the militia on the border and in the homes and communities of its members. This author joined Border Watch six times at the USA-Mexico border for their operations. A series of interviews provide additional information, as do interactions over and monitoring of social media activity (see Parsons, 2023). Members of Border Watch lived across the USA. With so few operations a year, apart from the handful of members living in states adjoining the border, texts, phone calls, and social media became a crucial part of involvement in Border Watch. From 2017 to 2019, John joined the members online and several private Facebook pages linked to or run by the militias that make up Border Watch. In doing so, he experienced the world of Border Watch in the same ways its members did: the distance, silence, and, at times, loneliness. Critically, members' experience on the border provided an element of authority to speak in these spaces where narratives of the border were shared and reproduced. The online groups were self-selecting with a broad gender and economic disparity, with very little variation in political affiliation. These spaces were understandably self-selecting, and the insights gained cannot be generalized beyond their specific communities. The militia members may face personal repercussions if their identities are revealed, and for this reason, we have created composites and pseudonyms for telling their stories (Creese et al., 2021). While a discussion of the complexities leading to John's acceptance requires a separate discussion, we will highlight that his identity as a white Australian man fitted within the dominant national ideology of Border Watch (see Parsons, 2023 for a lengthier discussion).

Even though this paper centers the militia's view on migrants and women who seek asylum, it is informed by Sara Riva's ethnographic research and theoretical insights. While Sara was conducting research in 2016–2017 at a US family immigration detention center at the Southern border, she was also working in a non-profit organization inside the center assisting refugees access their rights. Women who cross the USA-Mexico border seeking asylum experience great hardship during their journey, but also once they reach the USA where they are often detained and put in temporary holding cells to later be transferred to a detention center. In this particular case, women with children were taken to a detention center where they were held until they passed their credible fear interview (for more on the asylum interview, see Riva & Routon, 2020). As a female feminist researcher working in a non-profit legal aid/humanitarian organization with women who have experienced the violence of the asylum-seeking process at the border, Sara's aim was to center the practices that affect them. However, due to the fact that getting ethical clearance to interview detained women was extremely difficult, that some of the women in the detention center only spoke Indigenous languages (Riva, 2022), and the complicated power dynamics that underlie the researcher-participant relation, Sara decided to interview the legal advocates working inside the detention center with the detained women. In this paper, to illustrate the material consequences xenophobic narratives have at the border, we rely on the testimonies that legal advocates gave Sara, the documented testimonies that some women have already given to journalists and researchers, as well as the participant observation conducted during her research. The violence women who cross borders experience is enabled by dehumanizing discourses that are often mobilized for political purposes. Political affect thus plays a crucial role in this historical cycle of violence to those who seek asylum.

Through this collaborative analysis, we hope to illuminate the complexities within and highlight the connections between dominant on-the-ground narratives and political discourse. Similarly, this paper emphasizes why the masculine project of national protection underlying the border militia movement as protectors of a (white) feminized nation matters. First, this masculine project has become the reason for the militias to exist, an idea based on the invasion of the dangerous "other." Second, as Sara's experience in the field highlights, dehumanizing narratives have material consequences. Women who cross the USA-Mexico border are stigmatized through deviant narratives of motherhood and often end up being punished, detained, and/or confined. In this context, we argue that migrant women pose an interesting dichotomy: at one point requiring protection as victims of illicit organizations (i.e., Cartels), and at the same time criminalized for crossing the international border undocumented.

The invasion myth

The desert sun had been beating down on the militia's kitchen roof since 7 a.m. Even without a breeze to cool the men down, it became a refuge from the painful sunlight. Inside the tent, a few volunteers were drinking water and eating pop tarts. The militia had been in the desert for several days as part of their operation to stop the Cartel (a collective term Border Watch used for anyone conducting illegal activities) from moving narcotics into the USA. It was John's first time with Border Watch, and the volunteers took the opportunity to describe the "reality" of the border to an outsider. The discussion centered on migrants and the Cartels the militia believed controlled the illicit trade in the area. To illustrate the situation, Leon, an affable, burly man with tattooed arms and leathery skin, narrated events that occurred several years previously:

> *They started a fire. It was a mile or so from the border on one of the cattle properties east of here. When the response went out, a plane went along the border dropping Mexican flares for 40 miles. Flares, 'cause [sic] they don't last long. It was a signal for thousands of migrants and drugs waiting to cross at once. They knew the authorities couldn't catch everyone because they were all at the fire.*

Leon's story represented his reality of the border and that of the militia. The link to political narratives of invasion, such as the one that opens this paper, is evidenced in his description of the events. In this story, Leon was not speaking of singular migrants looking for a better life but of the Cartel and the "thousands" of migrants entering the nation under their direction. He described an international operation that controlled both sides of the border and pointed toward the power and reach of the Cartel and their ability to organize the ambitious and daring operation. The story spoke of the Cartels' defiance of US authorities and confirmed to Leon the government's failure to defend its borders and the need for a wall to protect the nation. Border Watch was made up of emergency workers, medical professionals, volunteers with church-led initiatives, ex-military and police workers from communities struggling with narcotic addiction. With often deeply emotional experiences with illicit substances, invasion narratives helped the volunteers make sense of their lived experience.

Leon was no exception, and his experience, while unique, was common among the volunteers. Leon lived in an area rife with heroin. Several years before joining Border

Watch, he buried the child of his daughter's best friend; a child, he said, "I held in my arms." Utilizing the language and perception of innocence common in invasion narratives, Leon viewed the child as an innocent victim of a larger drug war—as the baby's mother was a drug user. The invasion narrative provided Leon the ability to link the heroin involved in the child's death to the border and situated Leon's grief in a broader social, political, and national issue. Despite little evidence the child's death had anything to do with clandestine border crossers, Leon recounted his experiences to fall in line with a national security discourse that directed his affective response to the nation's border.

Despite the scale and impressive nature of the fire in Leon's story, he argued that the standard tactic of the Cartel was more sinister. Border Watch believed the area they patrolled was a major trafficking route into the USA. The physical difficulty of traversing the area and the idea that illicit organizations controlled the routes led the militia to believe that only those working for the Cartels, or criminals operating outside the Cartels, would risk the journey. The militia did not believe women and children could or would cross in these areas. It was only, as put by a militia member: "men and bad guys here," and the militia members easily accounted for any evidence to the contrary. For example, late one afternoon, a Border Patrol agent stopped by Border Watch's camp. The militia members slowly gathered around the agent to hear what he had to say. During the conversation, he spoke of 15 migrants in the adjacent valley. He informed the gathered crowd that the migrants had spotted Border Patrol and turned back. However, a pregnant woman had been unable to keep up. Later, Stan, an ex-army sniper and highly respected member of the militia explained: "The mules [smugglers] bring a decoy, so if they get in trouble, BP [Border Patrol] is tied up, and they get away." Stan's explanation of the event (bringing a migrant pregnant woman as a decoy) illustrates how militia members define the Cartel and their conception of women in the area; the former as individuals willing to sacrifice the latter for personal and monetary gain.

Several operations later, John sat down with Allan who, like Leon, linked the invasion narrative with his personal experience and innocent family.

> *I've had my family personally affected by narcotics where, within the last few years my stepson's father overdosed on heroin. That stuff's all brought in right through here. They, it's, they don't care what, what it does to communities, to families. It's, to them, it's just money.*

Asking Allan to elaborate further, he declared, "it's a pure evil coming across." His choice of words refers to people who cross borders as a collective "it" illustrates how he dismissed migrants' humanity. As he continued, he linked the discovery of a Rape Tree near a Border Watch camp to his family. Rape Trees describe a tree found in the desert with women's clothing hanging from it, and are a central trope of some militias. The militias believe these trees signify sexual assault in the crossing and act as a trophy and warning to future migrants in the area.

> *You've got guys that'll take, they'll take a woman across thinking that she's going for a better life, tie her to a tree, rape and kill her and leave her. And that's, those are the people "coming here for a better opportunity?" Uh-huh, that's frightening to me. My daughter's three hours up there.*

In Allan and Leon's descriptions of the border, the vulnerable (feminized) nation and its innocent citizens are central. Both men have personal experiences linked to narcotics, and each has connected the existence of rape trees to their family at home—increasing the affective power of the invasion narrative. In this scenario, there is a juxtaposition between the "good" citizen and the "bad" foreigner: the migrant as perpetrator versus the (militia member) citizen as savior. The idea that the Cartel used women and children highlights the militia's view of themselves as antagonistic to the Cartel. Similarly, believing the Cartel was using women as decoys allows for their narrative—that there are no women—to be coherent: there can only be women if the Cartel is using them for their purposes. The presence of a woman used as a decoy also confirmed to the militia the danger the nation faced from the "evil" perpetrators who were willing to abandon a pregnant woman in the desert.

Whenever discussions about such contradictions arose, the militia members routinely referred to the idea of an invasion context. While a singular event, such as the pregnant woman, may have been nothing more than an inability on her part to keep up with the others, it became evidence of national and cultural differences that an unsecured border was unable to keep separated. In this scenario, the evil of the Cartel is clearly defined. However, it is the malleable position of the pregnant woman that offers a critical insight into how gender and nationality are viewed by anti-immigrant proponents and the subsequent treatment migrant women receive.

The ease with which the militia was able to account for the presence of women in the desert illustrates the power this group has to control the local narrative. Similarly, it indicates the value the narrative has for the militia. Including women in the narrative as innocent victims allows the militia members to define themselves against the "evil" Cartel (Parsons, 2021). For many, the authors included, the presence of women in the far reaches of the desert would indicate a contradiction to the simplistic narrative of the militias. If the militia members accepted this interpretation, the affective power of the narrative that only "bad guys" and narcotics are crossing these areas would no longer help them make sense of their experiences in their home communities. Defining women as innocent victims of the Cartel maintains the coherence of their narrative; as such, migrant women become simultaneously innocent victims and criminals.

Migrant women as innocent and dangerous

Ideas of innocence and danger are sites of contestation. Who is included and excluded from these categories? Gendered and racialized discourses are often circulated to mobilize fear (Paynter & Riva, 2023; Williams, 2020). In the USA, race plays a crucial role in this imagination since innocence is only attributed to white women (Kanjere, 2019; Schinkel, 2019; Simson, 2018). Migrant women's bodies are understood as threats (in biopolitical terms) to the health of the nation due to their capacity to have non-white babies and their "inability" to be "good" mothers, a topic deeply explored by feminist and immigration scholars (Chavez, 2008a; Cisneros, 2014; Lugo-Lugo & Bloodsworth-Lugo, 2014). The notion of "bad" motherhood claims that female migrants of color, especially Latinas, have too many children, are too young to be mothers, or are simply unfit for motherhood. Writing on social media, Mary, a supporter of Border Watch from Wisconsin stated that pregnant women "cross just

before they give birth so they have it on U.S. soil" in order to take advantage of current immigration laws. This is in line with the dehumanizing "anchor-baby" narrative that claims that undocumented women use their babies to obtain citizenship and other "unearned" benefits (Chavez, 2017). In this vein, Carmen Lugo-Lugo and Mary Bloodsworth-Lugo (2014) explore how after 9/11 the notions surrounding "anchor babies" and Latinas bodies were articulated akin to a terrorist menace, including threats connected to terrorism and to normative notions of "Americanness." The US national narratives construct women of color as a cultural, social, political, and economic threat to the nation in which immigrants represent external threats and Black women as internal ones (Riva, 2017). By taking the risk of crossing the border "illegally," migrant women are considered "bad" mothers because they are "deliberately putting their children in harm's way," as Gina, a mother of three put it on Facebook in January, 2018. Gina went on to link this behavior to national culture by stating that this was very "un-American," and one that should carry the same legal response as an "American citizen" who would "put their children in the hands of human slavers."

In the following excerpt posted on social media by an anonymous person identifying themself only as a school teacher and supporter of Border Watch, the ideas of motherhood are entwined with a notion of exploitation (migrants taking advantage of the system) and danger to an "American" culture:

> *The school also provides day care centers for the unwed teenage pregnant girls (some as young as 13) so they can attend class without the inconvenience of having to arrange for babysitters or having family watch their kids. (More of our tax dollars at work!)*

The same author keys into what seems to be their main concern: culture. The immorality of the young pregnant women itself is not the primary issue, but that it signifies a dismissal of the values of the ambiguous and apparently homogenous "American" culture seems central:

> *It does, however, have everything to do with culture: A third-world culture that does not value education that accepts children getting pregnant and dropping out of school by age 15, and that refuses to assimilate, plus an American culture that has become so weak and worried about "political correctness," that we don't have the will to do anything about it.*

The school teacher's diatribe, written as a form of op-ed, illustrates the complexity of how migrant women and teenagers are viewed in the USA. The invasion narrative's affective power lies in its ability to enhance emotive responses to understand the world. Unwed pregnant teenagers can be seen as victims or as evidence of a nation under threat. The invasion narrative's affect on this teacher is centered around the fear of a failing culture. Like the militia members, the social media supporters make sense of migrant women by using the invasion narrative leading to their characterization as "uncivilized" and as "bad" mothers. Similarly, they disguise their xenophobia through the use of "culture" (Benveniste et al., 2017). This demonstrates the multiple ways of othering that can be created from the invasion myth (see Parsons, 2023 for a deeper discussion on the topic).

Unlike the white women who belong to the nation and are considered victims by default (Deliovsky, 2008; McIntosh, 2017), in the eyes of Border Watch, as mentioned previously, women (of color) who seek asylum are simultaneously understood as victims and perpetrators. On the one hand, they become placeholders for the Cartel's most evil actions: as victims without agency being used as a decoy to support the Cartel's criminal actions. On the other hand, according to militia supporters such as the teacher, they become perpetrators by crossing the border without the proper documentation and threaten "American" cultural identity. This can be seen in a comment Gary, a woodworker from Utah, made while discussing the Rape Tree near the Border Watch camp and a hypothetical assault:

> *First off, since we're some miles from the border, they shouldn't even be here. I don't, (sigh) I don't advocate [for] illegal immigration under any circumstances. If someone is across the border in Mexico and they're being raped, I, as an American, I can't cross the border to go and assist them. If they're over here, and I'm here, I will do everything I can to stop them.*

Despite his objection to sexual assault, the national border represented the limits of his responsibility and, in turn, the foundation of criminality. To Gary, crossing the border into Mexico would define him as a criminal in the same way he views those entering the USA. The national border plays a crucial role in how Gary understands the world; he describes the victim, first and foremost, as a criminal and himself as a defender of the nation. Our key point in raising the innocence and danger duality of women is the contradictory position they hold within the invasion narrative.

The invasion myth holds value because it allows ordinary citizens to make sense of their experiences. Politicians throughout history have used this idea to stir resentment and political support. This narrative is built upon ideas of citizenship, nationalism, gender, and their relationship to the notion of innocence. In the militia's view, the nation is innocent, and those who enter through the Southern border are dangerous. In our research, innocence and danger feature heavily in the narrative descriptions of migrant women. While the pregnant woman at the border exemplifies the evil of the criminals seeking entry, she also confirms an idea of incompatible motherhood. In the former, her experience becomes an example of the fate US innocents would face if the invasion were not stopped, the need for the government to secure the border, and the motivation for hundreds of US citizens to join the militias in response. In the latter, the pregnant woman is ascribed responsibility for her actions and a threat to her unborn child. In the minds of militia members: "If they break the law entering, how can I know they will follow any other law?" In this perspective, the pregnant woman, and others like her, become an example of foreign motherhood and a threat to the USA. The affect created by the interaction between invasion narratives and personal experience has led to our participants' beliefs about the border region in which women are either described as victims of the Cartel or criminals who choose to cross the border. A narrative that posits the USA as threatened by a Southern invasion of "dirty, immoral, dangerous individuals" entering the nation, or as one militia member put it, like "fucking cockroaches scurrying over."

As an example of the materiality of these narratives, we now move on to take a brief look at what happens in a family immigration detention center at the Southern border where women who cross the border with their underage children are detained (for more information on this process see Riva, 2017). In the detention center where Sara conducted her research, a team of volunteer legal advocates worked closely with the detained migrant women to help them secure their rights. Through interviews conducted with legal advocates who spent many hours with these women, we can get a glimpse of the ways in which people working at several border spaces treat migrant women.

The effect of the invasion narrative is that anti-immigration supporters view migrant women as irresponsible mothers who take unnecessary risks and put their children's lives in danger by crossing a hazardous border, rather than women who carefully consider their options. As one legal advocate described:

> *[Detained] women are often told things [by officers they meet at the border and at the detention center] like: "Don't you know that what you did is dangerous for your children?" or things like "You should have stayed in your country with your children," or "what you did is very dangerous." They [the officers] feel they have the moral authority to say these types of things to them, you know?*

As another legal advocate stated in an interview:

> *They are considered bad mothers for having too many children or crossing the border to "take advantage" of our country.*

To emphasize the irony of this concept, the interviewee used air quotes for "take advantage."

The rhetoric is that these women's intention is to get free education, medical care, and social protections. In the case of the Cartel, when women are treated as decoys and abused, they are victims. But, as one militia member declared, "the second you do it illegally, you've broken the law. So automatically right off the bat you're a criminal," and thus the consequences—including confinement—are brought upon themselves. These narratives are connected to how members of the militia understand themselves and their group—as protectors of the nation—and how women who seek asylum are perceived and treated by others. Additionally, these are gendered narratives because they are connected to how these women are expected to exercise motherhood and how the men from the militia are expected to exercise manhood.

Critically, the narrative enables the militia members and others to dismiss the treatment of migrants seeking asylum in much the same way as the El Paso shooter, as "preservation" of the nation-state against a material threat. Some of these women are locked up in temporary holding cells for days before they are transferred to a detention center. These cells are commonly known as "*hieleras*" [ice-boxes in Spanish] due to their extremely cold temperatures. One possible explanation for keeping such low temperatures in these cells is the association officers make between women and diseases (see, for instance, Redden, 2014). Such metaphors arose in our ethnographic work. In an interview at the detention center, a woman who had been confined in

a *hielera* told the legal advocate who was working on her case that a border patrol officer had called her a cockroach.

They often get called names when they are locked up, once a woman told me they [the officers] had shouted that they were all dirty and should be ashamed of themselves for bringing filth to our country.

As another legal advocate recounted:

> *Several women have told me the things they [officers] tell them when they are in the hielera. Things like: "You are dirty, like insects that nobody wants," "You are invading us, you should go back to your country," and other hideous stuff these women have to put up with.*

Such comments evidence the link between public discourse and understanding "outsiders" as a threat to the country; they not only connect women who seek asylum to notions of invasion but also associate them with dirt. By looking at these two US militarized groups at the border—Border Watch and border guards—we can see how racist and xenophobic narratives shape the affective responses to experiences and result in the mistreatment of migrants in the care of the USA.

Conclusion

The invasion narrative, and its innocence/danger binary, help people like Leon, Gary, Allan, Gina, and the school teacher make sense of their lives far from the border. It places their experiences within a broader national context where the narrative's affect directs their response toward the border. Once there, their practices on-the-ground are oriented toward their "enemy": the Cartel. In this narrative, there is little nuance: there are criminals, and there are US citizens. A lack of direct engagement with any migrants helps maintain this narrative and their practices do not change. Border Watch's existence was reliant on the idea of an invasion as it provided their *raison d'être* and an incentive to reproduce the narrative. The same narratives that helped Leon frame his experiences also effect how women who seek asylum are understood and thus treated at the border. In the militia's view, migrant women disrupt the linear narrative that posits migrants as always already dangerous and pose a contradiction: they are victims of the Cartel, and at the same time, criminals who cross borders. The militia's concern about the dangers of the Cartel, and their belief that the Cartel would use a woman as a decoy, allowed militia members to position themselves as antagonistic to the "evil" Cartel. In contrast, when removed from the geographical border, migrant women's innocence is subsumed by the danger they represent to national culture. These women are understood as dangerous for their capacity to bring more non-white babies into the USA and for being "bad" mothers—who risk their children's lives by crossing the border. Racist and xenophobic discourses describing migrants are dangerous because they end up having material consequences such as the incarceration and mistreatment of—among other groups—immigrant women.

Many of the women who flee from violence face extremely difficult choices and endure many hardships that push them to migrate. Once they enter what they consider a safe haven, such as the USA, instead of complying with international agreements and granting them protection, the state confines them in detention centers. This is legitimized by

xenophobic rhetoric deployed by the media and politicians—and parroted by citizens adhering to the narrative's basic tenets—that demonize people who cross borders. As we have noted, narrative modes are material and localized, they are connected to dominant anti-immigrant and political rhetoric, are cyclic, and feed each other, shaping gendered attitudes about the "Other."

As Brian Massumi (2015) notes, affective narratives appear to be increasingly replacing rational rhetoric. According to him, these narratives are not new, but arise and/or increase in particular contexts or are personality-dependent—such as the September 11 attacks, or Ronald Reagan's presidency. Using media outlets, politicians acting as much as personalities as statesmen turn the affective power of fear into collective pride and patriotism (32). Donald Trump is one notable politician. He uses the fear of a migrant invasion to instill patriotism among US citizens. The narrative's affective power means he no longer needs to make refined arguments. While some argue the affective response is filled with potential (Gould, 2009), in practice, most individuals are exposed to narrow narratives—and so are their responses. The invasion narrative does not mention the US' disregard for its international obligations vis-à-vis the asylum-seeking population, or its responsibility for the violence that takes place in the countries of origin through its imperial implication in the militarization, war on drugs, and gang violence in Central America. Similarly, there is never mention of the violence of detention and deportation but rather a focus on the threat that people who cross borders represent. The result is the ever-growing militarization of the border by the government, and increasingly, by citizens. Xenophobic narratives repeatedly return to US political discourse with troubling outcomes. We believe that it is relevant to continue documenting their evolution and on-the-ground effects, and the ways in which these narratives circulate and provide meaning among different groups. With this piece, we hope to reinforce attention to the importance of discourse for those who flee violence.

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Author contributions
JP collected and analyzed data with border militia. SR collected and analyzed data with legal advocates of detainees. SR and JP contributed equally to the analysis and theoretical contributions of this article.

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