

Mobilities, Media and Governmentality: Asylum Seekers in Lacolle, Quebec

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In 2017, over 20,000 people walked across the Canadian border between official points of entry to claim asylum (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada 2017). More than 18,000 of these irregular crossings occurred near the small town of Lacolle, Quebec at Canada's border with the state of New York (Levitz, 2018). As people walk across the border, they are arrested by waiting Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) officers and brought to the Canada Border Services Agency (CBSA) for security interviews and background checks to determine their eligibility to begin the asylum claims process. The topic of irregular migration became a point of increased focus in Canada for politicians across all levels of government, enforcement agencies, community organizations, and in the mass media. Movements of people – a practice as old as history – are typically accompanied by political and social uncertainties, which have been managed by those in power in incredibly diverse ways. This article reflects upon the anomalous rise of irregular migration into Canada through the small town of Lacolle, Quebec and how the government chose to respond. We ask: How do Canadian governmentalities of mobility express themselves in mass media coverage of irregular migration into Lacolle? Much like its European counterparts, the Canadian government has relied on discourses of humanitarian securitization to justify its policies. Irregular crossings have presented a significant challenge to the ways in which the Canadian government has traditionally limited and com-

pelled the agency of those subject to its power. To meet these challenges, the government has had to grapple with new governance strategies in a series of entangled infrastructural, policy, and narrative interventions. This article chronicles these recent developments and offers an analytical lens.

Empirical Data Collection and Methods

To address our research question, we conducted a content analysis of textual news coverage related to the case of Lacolle. Our qualitative inquiry was conducted from a body of 146 articles written over the course of the year 2017. While the story of Lacolle continues to unfold, the first year of this trend (2017) – and of Donald Trump's presidency – presented a cohesive and manageable body of coverage to work with. We selected several Canadian publishers to draw articles from: the *Globe and Mail* (12), *CBC News* (48), the *Toronto Star* (19), and Postmedia groups, including the *Montreal Gazette* (39), the *National Post* (19), and the *Toronto Sun* (9). All are newspapers except for the *CBC*, Canada's public broadcaster, which publishes online. They produced the most content about the case of Lacolle and are among the most widely circulated in Canada; they were not chosen to represent the Canadian political spectrum, although, both sympathetic and critical coverage of the present Liberal Canadian government is included ("Daily Newspaper Circulation Data," n.d.). The *CBC*, *National Post*, and *Globe and Mail* are directed at national audiences while *The Star*, the *Sun* and the *Gazette*

target regional audiences (Ontario and Quebec respectively). Postmedia cross-publishes across its brands routinely; in these cases, only the original publication was counted and analyzed. All selected content is exclusively related to irregular migration into the small border town of Lacolle.

Our analysis is geared towards identifying and exploring trends in the coverage. We make no generalizations on the basis of this study but did take note of several particularities to further explore. We read and coded printed copies of the text, compared our accounts, and took note of commonalities and differences in our perceptions. Our findings aim to shed light on what is emerging as a new paradigm in the relations between Canada and the United States. Along the way, we seek to nuance understandings of Canadian immigration policy and generate novel insights regarding the state of migration governance in North America. Specifically, our attempt is to identify the truth-claims and frames constructed by both journalists and those featured in their coverage. We chose this methodological approach in part because we are interested in discussing what is *said* to be true and *made* to be true rather than attempting to identify what is true *per se*.

Politics: Performance and/of Reality

Donald J. Trump was inaugurated as President of the United States during January of 2017 on a mixed platform of isolationism and divisiveness (Buschman 2017; Caidi/Ghaddar/Allard 2017). Among his first acts was a de facto “Muslim ban” (Executive Order 13769), which sought to bar citizens of several purportedly dangerous Muslim-majority countries from entering the United States (Enos 2017; Solyom 2017a). The policy was upheld in June 2018 by the United States Supreme Court on the grounds that it is not about religion but rather the ability to vet potential entrants, despite many statements to the contrary by Trump during his election campaign (Cillizza 2018). Nonetheless, it attracted significant attention. Among those to respond to the policy was Canadian Prime Minister, Jus-

tin Trudeau, who sent a tweet (and carefully crafted publicity stunt) on January 28th, 2017 that has since been critically reprised in the national media and online. He said: „To those fleeing persecution, terror war, Canadians will welcome you, regardless of your faith. Diversity is our strength, #WelcometoCanada“ (Forrest 2017; Trudeau 2017). This sentiment contrasts Trump’s political performances, which appeal to the populist perception of declining social status amongst mostly white ‘common man’ in America (Pettigrew 2017). Obviously neither politician represents the views of their entire country, however, their strategies present a good barometer of what constitutes acceptable public discourse among their respective constituencies (Clayman 2017; Montgomery 2017). Trudeau’s political tack resonates with the narrative that Canada is somehow above the nativist turn in Western politics, but as our study shows, the situation is more complex. The numerous arrivals in Lacolle attracted protests from several right-wing nationalist groups at the border along with anti-fascist counter protests (Solyom 2017e; Tasker 2017). Even before the resurgence of the far right, Canadian immigration policy was not especially welcoming. In fact, Canada’s points-based immigration system prioritizes would-be newcomers for their age, education and skills, and investment potential and has been championed by Donald Trump himself as ‘merit-based’ (Bloemraad 2012; Paquet 2018). Prime Minister Trudeau’s message of diversity as an asset has come to be equated with Canada and Canadians as ‘better-than’. Unlike nativist protesters in Lacolle, Trudeau’s patriotism is expressed as a false transcendence of nationalism through tolerance (“It’s easy, in a country like Canada, to take diversity for granted. In so many ways, it’s the air we breathe” (Trudeau 2015)). While Canadians are generally positive towards immigrants, Canada’s remote geography has prevented high levels of uncontrolled migration and enabled the development of an exclusive immigration regime (Bloemraad

2012). Canada may be very diverse but this diversity has been carefully curated.

Relations between Canada and the US have been shaken by the divergent performative interests of the leaders on each side. The Canada-US Safe Third Country Agreement (STCA) has been in place since 2004 to prevent so-called ‘asylum shopping’, stipulating that would-be asylum seekers must make their claim in the first safe country they arrive in (Proctor 2017; Selley 2017). In essence, this means that if an individual arrives at an official point of entry to make a claim, they will be turned away unless they meet a small list of exception criteria such as having close family in Canada (Proctor 2017). However, crossing outside of official ports of entry circumvents Canada’s ability to insulate itself from its duty of care to asylum seekers and legal obligation to hear a refugee claim (Harris 2017a). After the EO 13769 (‘Muslim ban’) was announced, the palpable sense of unease began to push people towards Canada, due to its welcoming reputation. The word about the loophole in the STCA spread quickly amongst migrant diasporas in the United States and globally through the use of both social and diaspora media (“Thank you, God” 2017).

From January through to August 2017, the coverage focuses on the STCA, the quantity of arrivals, and their diverse origins, from places like Eritrea, Syria, and Sudan (Shingler 2017a; Solyom 2017b). At that point, we detect a notable shift toward an emphasis on American policy and its implications for migrants as well as a significant uptick in the quantity of coverage. Specifically, reports came to revolve around the Trump administration’s threats (and ultimate decision) to terminate Temporary Protected Status (TPS) for citizens of Haiti, Honduras, Nicaragua, and El Salvador and the ways that this move threatened to further increase the number of arrivals to Lacolle (Solyom 2017d). TPS is a humanitarian immigration provision, which bars deportations to countries dealing with the aftermath of environmental disasters, a

lack of general security, or the inability of a government to receive deportees (U.S. Department of Homeland Security 2018). This policy decision prompted many asylum-seekers to venture North from the U.S. due to the uncertainty of their status, despite the fact that Canada repealed its own “temporary suspension of deportations” to Haiti in 2016 (Ballingall 2017; Hinkson 2017). The Haitian diaspora was given particular attention as by the end of 2017, it accounted for over 8,286 of 50,440 claims – the most of any country – a huge increase compared to 631 out of 22,930 claims during 2016 (Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada 2017a, 2017b).

Outreach efforts aimed to instill the sense that coming to Canada is an uncertain affair and can be read as an attempt by the Canadian government to establish control over the narrative. This rhetorical strategy was accompanied by a seemingly sharp decrease in successful claims from Haitian migrants. While statistics on acceptance vary across sources, multiple sources in the coverage indicate that less than 10 % of claims from Haiti have been successful (Harris 2017b; Wilton 2017). These numbers are likely unrepresentative of the final outcome due to a backlog of over 7000 claims at the time of writing, however, the general consensus across the sources examined is that there has been a significant drop in the rate of successful asylum claims from Haiti (despite a significant rise in the number of new claims registered) (Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada 2017b; Wilton 2017). This naturally raises questions about the extent to which claim decisions, which are supposed to be based upon the merits of the existence of a well-founded fear of persecution, are subject to the prevailing government’s narratives.

Governmentalities of Mobility and Truth

Our content analysis points to varying terms used to refer to migrants, including *illegal*, *irregular*, *queue jumper*, and *asylum seeker* (Laframboise 2017; MacCharles 2017; Zil-

io 2018). While each term carries different connotations, migration is generally framed (across the publications examined) as a problem in need of a solution, though conservative coverage tended to resort to stronger, more alarmist framings, using terms like “crisis” and “fiasco” (Barutciski 2017; “National Post View” 2017). The most consistent theme across all accounts is a narrative of *pressure*: on law enforcement agencies, the asylum claims system, and the social infrastructure related to resettlement (Hinkson 2017; Laventure 2017; Shingler 2017d). We also note a strong policy emphasis, and a privileging of politicians’ discourses in the crafting of the narrative. Coverage of Lacolle disproportionately related to the political implications of the increase in migrants, and the associated budgetary, infrastructural, and juridico-bureaucratic pressures. This also manifested in an emphasis on law and order from government actors, who projected a message of control. Experts given voice consisted in a large part of lawyers and academics (Enos 2017; Hamilton 2017; Harris 2017a; Shingler 2017b). These insights regarding pressure and those related to humanitarian securitization below are backed up by quantitative studies of migration reporting conducted in European contexts (Allen 2016; Bleich/Bloemraad/Graauw 2015; Chouliaraki/Zaborowski 2017). However, we did notice unique qualities in the narrative as a result of the divergent political performances on either side of the border.

Scholarship on borders frequently describes them as spaces of legal exception (Agamben 2005; Chouliaraki/Musarò 2017; Isin/Rygiel 2007). Indeed, borders are not just physical manifestations of state power but extend broadly into discursive and virtual spaces (Peoples/Vaughan-Williams 2010; Topak et al. 2015). In the context of borders and international mobility, the standard rules of engagement between state and subject do not apply. In Canada, official crossings, referred to as Customs Controlled Areas (CCAs), constitute a zone of legal and administrative ex-

ception (Government of Canada 2015b). Such zones of exception serve as spaces for bodies to be ritually examined for deviance and criminality (Salter 2007). Border crossers are conditioned and compelled to partake in an examination of their relative acceptance of and subjugation to state power (Salter 2007). Privileged travelers, leaving their homes only temporarily, might manifest this by carrying a passport, voluntarily removing their shoes at the airport, or answering (sometimes intimate) questions if required upon re-entry (Salter 2007). However, governmentalities of mobility are not experienced equally. Migrants from the global south looking for security are subjected to significantly more intense scrutiny (De Genova 2016; Razack 2008; Rygiel 2011). In Canada, a potential immigrant is subjected to rigorous background checks informed by the use of social media and signals intelligence (Lyon 2017; Privacy International 2017; Security Intelligence Review Committee 2017; Government of Canada 2015a). An asylum seeker who cannot be properly identified at the border (or is identified as a threat) can be detained indeterminately (Larsen/Piché 2009; Muscati 2017). In this sense, the crossing at Lacolle has come to present itself as a space of resistance. While still subject to state power and its inquiry into their values, histories, and personal lives, communities of migrants have discovered ways to subvert aspects of the state’s control over their agency and mobility. Whereas borders have often been used as a conceptual tool for crafting docile bodies (and minds), in Lacolle, the government’s own policy has been turned into a tool of resistance and the unofficial crossing has taken on an air of permanence (Topinka 2010; Cochrane/Laventure 2017).

Much like the European Union, Canadian governmentalities of mobility are clearly rooted in a paradoxical politics of humanitarian securitization (Chouliaraki/Musarò 2017). Humanitarian securitization describes a fundamental tension between the oft-competing imperatives of empathy and governmental-

ity in liberal democracies. The humanitarian duty of care to asylum seekers is frequently in contest with the priorities of maintaining national sovereignty and domestic security (from a strategic-realist point of view), yet the discourse of humanitarianism has been co-opted for use at the border (Vaughan-Williams 2015; Mustapha 2013). This is expressed in the coverage in several ways. The consistent narrative of pressure in the media accounts examined does not construct migrants as individual threats to national security but rather to collective law and order – homogenizing disaster metaphors are readily available (Ring 2017; Wilton 2017). Critics speculated that Prime Minister Trudeau’s liberal government has lost control of the situation and in response his government has taken many steps to counter this narrative, though such criticisms persist at the time of this writing (Litwin 2017; Zilio 2017; Delacourt 2018).

Infrastructural interventions point to the construction of a camp in Cornwall, Ontario by the Canadian military in August later dismantled by October 2017, and barely used (MacCharles 2017; Rodrigues 2018). The stories were explicit that the military would have nothing to do with security (Shingler 2017c). In a semiotic sense, the camp was an integral tool in the government’s agenda-setting efforts, and in the crafting of its narratives of order. Indeed, the camp-as-symbol is highly evocative of the humanitarian ethos of migration management, and elicits notions of containment, alterity, and control (Isin/Rygiel 2007; Rygiel 2011). The military also erected tents and winterized infrastructure at the crossing in Lacolle, thereby formalizing government presence at the official-unofficial crossing (Zilio 2017a).

In the reports examined, security narratives were often de-emphasized in favour of those pertaining to law and order („The RCMP aren’t there to treat them like bandits. They’re here to apply the law.“ (Enos 2017)). This can be seen as the result of an interplay between the government’s influence on the

framing of the narrative as one of humanitarian securitization and the media’s priming of the issue in the context of systemic pressure. The government regularly appealed to orderly and legal migration citing principles of fairness, emphasizing how strict the Canadian immigration system is and highlighting the dangers of irregular crossings (Hinkson 2017). The Canadian government’s rhetoric, unlike that of the Trump administration, carefully avoided explicitly securitizing migrants. This was mimicked in the media; security procedures were often described vaguely, using words like ‘process’ and ‘vet’. If unpacked, it was concise and un-performative: “[the] process includes an interview, fingerprinting and photos, as well as security and criminal record checks.” (Harris 2017a). There were, however, instances where a direct narrative of securitization emerged. A report in the *National Post* on March 17, 2017, features a CBSA union representative describing the border as “swiss cheese” warning that it is largely undefended due to a lack of resources within the agency (Quan 2017). While migrants are rarely constructed as individual threats, there are indications that underlying the political performance of humanitarian securitization exist many problematic values and practices (Vaughan-Williams 2015). In October, the *Toronto Star* broke a story about a questionnaire administered by the RCMP in Lacolle that specifically targeted Muslim asylum claimants, questioning them on their attitudes towards women in authority and Islamic extremism (Shephard 2017). The questionnaire was removed from service shortly after but this indicates that underneath the welcoming narrative espoused by Canadian politicians, the discontinuities inherent to policies of humanitarian securitization are grappled with much more directly by Canada’s frontline enforcement agencies.

The general avoidance of an explicit securitization vocabulary in the coverage contrasts frequently performative humanitarianism. Depictions of vulnerable and needy migrants;

portrayals of families, especially pregnant women and children; and a sense of gratitude for Canadian enforcement and settlement services are displayed and detailed. When migrants are quoted, their words are used to support the pre-established narrative of humanitarian securitization – neither them nor their advocates are in control. Examples include: “Thank you, God.” (Shingler 2017b, 2017d). “[P]eople here are very nice and very helpful and people respect you. Even the border guards, they respected me and spoke to me politely. I crossed the border illegally and they helped me with the luggage and the kids. That never happened in Saudi Arabia.” (Solyom 2017c). Despite this attribution of voice to migrants, and consistent performances of empathy, humanitarian elements still work to construct migrants as a problem and reinforce the validity of humanitarian securitization as an approach to migration governance. Even in the context of discussing basic needs like housing, narratives of pressure and counter-pressure are consistently evoked (by spokespeople for community organizations and government officials) thus encouraging further emphasis on control (Quan 2017; Shingler 2017d; Solyom 2017c).

In August 2017, which coincided with the peak of arrivals in Lacolle, the Canadian government formed the Ad Hoc Intergovernmental Taskforce on Irregular Migration to mitigate challenges to its control at the border (Litwin 2018). The taskforce launched a public outreach campaign, claiming that asylum seekers converging on Lacolle were acting upon “misinformation” about Canada’s strict asylum system (Dyer 2017). Many quotes attributed to government officials cast migrants as naïve. (“It’s very important ... that people understand very clearly that Canadian law applies, and we will be assiduous in enforcing that law, and people should not think that border hopping is a desirable or productive thing to do,” said Public Safety Minister Ralph Goodale” (Peritz 2017)). This notion is further supported by several quotes from migrants

stating their belief that Canada is a welcoming place and that life is safer than in the United States (“‘It’s a dream. This is what we are looking for,’ said Milien... ‘I have no anxieties since I’ve arrived here in Canada.’” (Ballingall 2017)). To mitigate these ideas, the government engaged in a cross border community outreach campaign against what it views as “misinformation” targeting diaspora communities specifically affected by the revocation of TPS (Zimonjic/Barton 2017). In addition to reaching out through mass and social media, Canadian MPs Emmanuel Dubourg (who is of Haitian descent) and Pablo Rodriguez (of Argentinian descent) were sent to speak in American communities, to address and correct misinformation (MacCharles 2017; Zilio 2017a, 2017b). In its bid to reclaim control over the situation, the government tried to appeal to the human security of migrants emphasizing the risks in irregular crossings, highlighting the peril of death (Hinkson 2017). In their efforts to promote regular migration, government communications carefully avoided mentioning the loophole in the STCA. In fact, the campaign arguably distributed *misinformation of its own* by claiming that there is no benefit to crossing irregularly (Litwin 2017). Such an assertion completely ignores the very clear benefit of crossing irregularly if one has been in the United States already. Incentives for crossing include access to social services like healthcare, work permits, and a chance at asylum. Even if asylum is denied, this option is still worth it to many faced with the prospect of being forcibly returned to countries struggling with high levels of violence, failing social services, and poor job prospects in the short-term.

Conclusion

The events that unfolded through 2017 (and continue to unfold) in Lacolle, Quebec threatened the efficacy of Canadian governmentalities of mobility. In response to this challenge, the government orchestrated a concerted outreach and media campaign to comple-

ment policy and infrastructural interventions. Political actors communicating through the mass media actively construct truth-claims about the world to justify their interventions by crafting and performing a chosen narrative (Chong/Druckman 2007; Georgiou 2018; Hajer 2009; Montgomery 2017). In our example, the deployment of the concept of ‘misinformation’ and the associated claims made by the Canadian government is emblematic of its ambivalent performances of humanitarian securitization (i.e. maintaining the perception of control without tarnishing Canada’s reputation as a welcoming nation). We conclude by arguing that, in the face of challenges to its control over mobility, as has been illustrated by events in Lacolle, the government responded with a range of strategies consisting of both narrative and enacted interventions, which we term governmentalities of truth. The notion that reality is (in part) constituted by the state is not a new idea; truth-making as governance is a common practice in international relations (Millikin 1999). Much as states make truth, they make borders (Ruggie 1993). Mobility has been called the “master deviance in International Relations” as it challenges the territorial integrity of the state, thereby subverting its sovereignty (Salter 2007: 58). In the age of instant access to ubiquitous information and communication technologies the imperative for states to control the narrative of truth as much as the bodies of its subjects has intensified. The case of Lacolle demonstrates that while state governmentalities of mobility may be challenged, this power can be reconstituted through governmentalities of truth – the capacity of a government to craft new realities through narrative, policy, and infrastructural interventions. Government discourses of humanitarian securitization have fomented uncertainty by (ostensibly) lowering the number of successful claims, engaging in a multi-modal outreach campaign, and building camps and security outposts while simultaneously emphasizing differences with the Trump administration.

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