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Elite Discourse on Unaccompanied Minors and the U.S.-Mexico Border

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Abstract:

In the summer of 2014, there was a significant increase in the detainment of unaccompanied minors at the U.S.-Mexico border, the vast majority from Central America. Political and social elites, that is, individuals who can significantly influence public opinion and governmental policies, appeared on major U.S. news programs and called for added border security. We conducted a discourse analysis of the socio-cultural utterances social and political elites, specifically conservative U.S. politicians, television hosts, and political analysts and commentators made on television between June 1st and August 31st of 2014. We found that conservative elites referenced the migrant children to reiterate the discursive construction of the U.S.-Mexico border as a boundary meant to deter and constrain undesirables, thus, contributing to the "securitization discourse" that frames border security as imperative.

Keywords: elite discourse, refugees, U.S.-Mexico border, unauthorized migrant minors



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Elite Discourse on Unaccompanied Minors and the U.S.-Mexico Border

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Introduction

Even with the much-touted interdependence resulting from globalization, borders still matter. In the case of the U.S. and Mexico, the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) did not keep the U.S. from increasing its policing of the two countries' shared border.¹ The U.S. significantly ramped up its security effort after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, with additional physical barriers.² The U.S.-Mexico border is now amongst the most surveilled geopolitical demarcation in the world.³

In the summer of 2014 the U.S.-Mexico border, particularly the stretch along Texas, received considerable media attention in the United States. An increase in the detainment of children, referred to as "unaccompanied minors", the vast majority coming from Central American countries, attracted the U.S. media's interest in this international boundary. Political and social elites, that is, individuals who can significantly influence public opinion and governmental policies, appeared on the major news programs and called for added border security. We have conducted a discourse analysis of the socio-cultural utterances made on television by social and political elites, specifically conservative U.S. politicians, television hosts, and political analysts and commentators, between June 1st and August 31st of 2014. We demonstrate how, following the arrival of migrant children, conservatives reiterated the construction of the U.S.-Mexico border as a boundary meant to deter and constrain undesirables and contribute to the "securitization discourse" that frames the border security as imperative (Newman 2006: 149). Before discussing the findings, we briefly review the scholarly literature that informs our theoretical framework and our methodological approach.

¹ See Andreas 2005; 2009; Coleman 2005.

² See Nevins / Dunn 2008; Ackleson 2005.

³ See Andreas 2005.

Literature Review

The border signifies a geographical marker that divides for the sake of security and integrates for the sake of economy.⁴ Prior to 9/11 most security efforts were symbolic, redirecting unauthorized migrants rather than completely stopping them, in order not to politically undermine transnational economic expansion.⁵ Separately, Nevins⁶ argues that the additional policing of the U.S.-Mexico border intended to address the migratory movement resulting from globalization. Moreover, since 9/11 when economic and security discourses about the U.S.-Mexico border "clash", the "securitization discourse" takes precedence (Newman 2006). Though there "is a security/economy nexus" (Coleman 2005: 189) associated with the border, the counter-terrorism initiatives have a security focus, setting "deterrence level" expectations at "an impossible 100 percent" (Andreas 2003: 4). The increasingly impervious physical border dissociates and distances people, while simultaneously inviting open market participation in its economy.

Using the threat of terrorist attacks to invoke physical borders, many within the U.S. have trafficked 'security' as a way to manage the discourse on limited immigration. Following the Cold War era, as attention moved from external military threats to "societal security", a dominant discourse framed unauthorized migration to the U.S. as threat to security (Ackleson 2005: 168). Research shows that "Official state discourse [...] helps connect migration with ideas of danger, risk, and order in the public imagination" (Ackelson 2005: 168) and "political and social elites" define the discourse of the border and of those who enter the country (Newman 2006: 148). Non-elites, such as 'border militias', can also influence the securitization "that ushers in both the enemy and the 'we', 'the people', 'the nation', 'the society'" (Doty 2007: 130). Thus, the U.S.-Mexico border serves as a "demarcation" of exclusion and inclusion (Newman 2006: 148) and as such reflects U.S. society's social order (Newman 2006: 156).

As a liberal state, the U.S. functions by design as an exclusionary nation. With its laws, it defines who falls under its jurisdiction, who is a criminal, and who has access to the rights it confers. In other words, the U.S. uses the law as a security practice to construct "legal identities", and "to create legal borders and restrict the fundamental rights of particular populations by placing them outside of normal legal procedures" (Basaran 2008: 340). As we show in the findings, right-leaning social and political elites constructed unaccompanied

⁴ See Andreas 2009; Mitchell 2002; Nevins 2002; Ackleson 1999.

⁵ See Andreas 2009.

⁶ See Nevins 2002; 2001.

minors as criminals. They did so by dismissing the possibility that unaccompanied minors were entitled to the status of refugee, and the limited legal inclusion and legal protections it confers.

Method

We compiled news show transcripts from the search engine Lexis Nexus. We searched using the key words "unaccompanied minors" to search for news transcripts of shows that aired on ABC News, CBS News, CNN, Fox News Network, MSNBC News, and NBC News between June 1st and August 31st of 2014, a timespan that encapsulates the days when the issue of unaccompanied minors being detained at the U.S.-Mexico border was covered by multiple news outlets. We did an initial review of 117 transcripts and narrowed that number down after discounting transcript duplications and transcripts that did not include utterances about unaccompanied minors and/or the border from social and political elites.

As part of our analysis, we read through the transcripts that met our search parameters and coded them for recurring themes and grammatical structures. We used critical discourse analysis⁷ and systemic functional grammar⁸ to analyze and interpret the multiple news show transcripts. The goal of critical discourse analysis is to analyze how language functions as a medium for dominance and power. This framework stresses that language is always constitutive of particular social identities and relations, as well as systems of knowledge and beliefs.⁹ Systemic functional grammar, the second type of discourse analysis we employed, interrogates how grammar resources are used to make particular meanings.¹⁰ These approaches allow us to understand that as a socially constructed concept applied to migrant children, "unaccompanied minor" is a subject produced through the linguistic representation of individuals in relation to geopolitical boundaries. In other words, creation and maintenance of "unaccompanied minors" as discursive subjects in U.S. media serve as a reflection of the dominant ideologies that figure into the construction of the U.S.-Mexico border in U.S. society.

⁷ See Fairclough 1998; 1995a; 1995b; 1989; Chouliaraki / Fairclough 1999.

⁸ See Halliday 1994.

⁹ See Fairclough 1995b.

¹⁰ See Halliday 1994.

Findings

Unaccompanied Minors, Go Home

From October 2013 to August 2014, authorities detained over 60,000 unaccompanied Central American minors at the U.S.-Mexico border.¹¹ Most of them requested asylum, explaining that they fled violence and death threats from violent transnational gangs that originated on the streets of Los Angeles, California. Unlike unauthorized Mexican migrants, Central American minors cannot be deported immediately. The William Wilberforce Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act of 2008, which was unanimously passed by Congress, requires that unaccompanied minors from Central America be sheltered and go through immigration courts.¹² Despite the unaccompanied minors' legal rights within the U.S., the federal government was not properly processing detainees. Mary Megan McCarthy, the Executive Director of the National Immigration Justice Center, explained in July:

[...] we are truly facing a refugee emergency and a due process crisis. At the National Immigrant Justice Center, we have been in some of these detention centers and we have seen the rapid processing of women and children and it is extremely concerning. Our U.S. laws provide for due process protections for individuals seeking safety on our shores. And, yet what we are doing is expediting these processes and denying individuals access to counsel in a meaningful day in court (Hayes 2014b).

Even though he had supported the Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act, Senator John McCain of Arizona had no problem with the denial of due process. As he saw it, if migrant children "believe they are victims of persecution" they can go to the U.S. consulate or embassy in their countries and request asylum (Harris-Perry 2014). The U.S. government's willingness to negate and disregard its own laws and policies in order to ensure the removal of migrant children from its territory underscores the abjection of foreign children referenced with the collective noun "unaccompanied minors".

Throughout the summer, elites proposed that the U.S. government formally expedite the deportation of unaccompanied minors. In order to support their position, they presented arguments that included utterances that sought to undermine the minors' legal processes standing. For example, Mark Krikorian of the Center for Immigration Studies, a conservation research organization, stated:

It's illegal immigration is what -- is what we're seeing here. It's parents and family members in the United States paying smugglers to bring their kids here. That's what it is. This is not a refugee flow, it's a regular illegal immigration flow (Kornacki 2014).

¹¹ See Capehart 2014.

¹² See McCormick 2014.

By linking the word "illegal" with words like "smugglers", Krikorian framed unaccompanied children from Central America as law-breakers rather than as asylum seekers. Congressman Lamar Smith of Texas, who also used the words "illegal minors", framed the migrant children as drains on public services:

I really think that 95 percent of these illegal minors are in the country to stay. The administration is not serious about sending them back home to their families they left behind and they are going to be enrolled in our schools and that's going to an additional strain on the resource there (Baier 2014).

Similarly, Governor Scott Walker of Wisconsin argued that "[I]f we're not having a rapid process to get them back to the country of origin they're going to basically blend into whatever community and state and country they're in. That's going to have costs and drain the entire system" (Kornacki 2014).

Discursively framing migrant children as criminals and financial burdens on U.S. communities is part of a longstanding anti-immigrant discourse. Thus, it is not surprising that Pat Buchanan, a conservative commentator who ran for the Republican Party's presidential nomination on an anti-immigrant platform in 1992, 1996, and 2000, also used such language. Contending that the discussion of unaccompanied minors is in fact a discussion about the "transformation of America" resulting from the arrival of unauthorized migrants, he stated: "These folks coming into this country are poor. They don't speak the language. They're not well-educated. And they're going to go on welfare rolls and they get social welfare benefits" (Hannity 2014, July 16).

By framing unaccompanied minors simply as "illegal" border crossers and as threats to "societal security" (Ackleson, 2005: 169), or the social cohesion of the nation, elites both negate the designation of refugee and justify the legal and social exclusion of Central American children arriving from south of the U.S.-Mexico border. Aware of the media attention and political traction the rhetoric of expedited deportation was gaining, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) publicly asked the U.S. government to "recognize that this is a refugee situation, which implies that they [migrant children] shouldn't be automatically sent to their home countries but rather receive international protection" (quoted after McCormick 2014).

Border Security Discourse

In their comments about the unaccompanied minors, elites constructed the U.S.-Mexico border as a necessary demarcation between interrelated geographical spaces, worlds that interact with each other as cultural and economic corridors. For example, in a misinformed and highly publicized letter to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, Congressman Phil Gingrey of Georgia, who had been a physician, argued that the minors carried the sort of pathogens often associated with the less developed, so-called 'third world'. He wrote:

Reports of illegal immigrants carrying deadly diseases such as swine flu, dengue fever, Ebola virus and tuberculosis are particularly concerning. I have serious concerns the diseases carried by these children may begin to spread too rapidly to control. In fact, as you undoubtedly know, some of these have no known cure (quoted after Matthews 2014b).

By constructing migrant children as biological threats to public health, Gingrey suggests that those supporting the children's asylum claims are endangering the country. For some local communities, Congressman Gingrey's stated concerns resonated with their misimpressions of immigrants, particularly those from Latin America, and, thus, they implemented official restrictions in attempts to restrain the movement of migrants within the U.S. The town of League City, Texas, for example, banned migrant children in order to "control the potential threat of communicable diseases reported to be prevalent among illegal aliens" (Hayes 2014d). League City officials took this action even though the previous year Texas experienced one of the largest measles outbreaks, and that Central American children are more likely to be vaccinated than U.S. children (Hayes 2014d). As Rachel Pearson, an MD/PhD student at the Institute for the Medical Humanities and the University of Texas Medical Branch and writer for the *Texas Observer*, explained on MSNBC, immigrants to the U.S. have long been associated with health pandemics:

What we see historically is that when diseases or conditions occur in people who are social outsiders, so immigrants, people of color, women -- those diseases are seen by whiter society as markers that the people are impure or that they're lacking in virtue. So, whereas lice has one meaning for American kids in a summer camp in Pennsylvania, the meaning becomes totally different if it's a group of kids we think of as outsiders (Hayes 2014d).

Congressman Gingrey's public fear-mongering not only ignored the plight of the unaccompanied minors, but more troubling, he validated the stereotypical and xenophobic notion that the southern border of the U.S. embodies a geographical space where two worlds—one healthy and the other diseased—meet.

With their rhetoric on unaccompanied minors, elites also depicted the U.S.-Mexico border as not just a territorial boundary, but also as a boundary between order and chaos; between the

(so-called 'first world') civility of the U.S. and the (so-called 'third world') barbarity that reigns beyond its southern border. Consider the following three statements made by Republican Congressmen Steve King of Iowa, Louie Gohmert of Texas, and Rich Nugent of Florida, respectively:

This is the most dangerous demographic that you can select out of any civilization being brought into the United States and repatriated (Harris-Perry 2014).

World English Dictionary defines 'invasion', as invading with armed forces. But it's any encroachment or intrusion, the onset or advent of something harmful, as in a disease, pathologically the spread of cancer from its point of origin into surrounding tissues. (Hayes 2014c)

When you have those types coming across the border, they're not children at that point. You know, these kids have been brought up in a culture of, you know, of thievery, of culture of, you know, murder, of rape (Harris-Perry 2014).

In constructing migrant children as both moral and physical threats, the Congressmen reinforce the notion of the national border as one that delineates morality and civility. In this way, their statements are reminiscent of the rhetorical use of 'civilization' and 'barbarism' as the United States implemented the Manifest Destiny doctrine. Similarly, such abjection of the unaccompanied minors is not unlike the abjection that Latinas/os in the U.S. have faced for decades –from the stereotypical depiction of "violent, and pathologically dangerous *bandidos*" (Berg 2002: 69) of the silent film era and the *cholo* (i.e. gang member) stereotypes in contemporary films¹³ to the exclusionary policies and laws proposed in states with large and/or rapidly growing Latina/o communities.

The three Congressmen quoted above acknowledged that the unaccompanied minors are coming from violent countries. Their acknowledgement, however, did not lead them to conclude that these children needed to be protected. Rather, they concluded that the very exposure to violence made the minors both non-children and violent, pathological products of their (cultural) environment against which the U.S. must be protected. As Yolanda Pierce, Associate Professor at the Princeton Theological Seminary, explained on national television, this discourse is troubling:

We have to be completely clear about the racist undertones that just imbue all of this language. But we also have to be clear that we are in a human rights crisis. That these children are not only being stripped of their humanity, but they are being stripped of their protective status as children; that they're making the argument, 'these are not four and five-year-olds'. Apparently these are grown adults in four or five-year-old bodies (Harris-Perry 2014).

¹³ See Mora 2012; 2011; Mora / Christianakis 2012.

Denying children from south of the U.S.-Mexico border their childhood and human potential both suggests a form of cultural superiority, which many political conservatives often equate with a perceived American exceptionalism, and conversely constructs U.S. children –those considered American– as truly innocent and worthy of humane treatment.

The media and political attention given to the Central American unaccompanied minors detained at the U.S.-Mexico border provided elites with the opportunity to stress a "securitization discourse", using the geopolitical divide to promote political positions (Newman 2006: 149). In fact, some television personalities made disingenuous statements, giving the erroneous impression that the border represents serious security vulnerabilities. On July 29th, Republican Congressman Mo Brooks of Alabama accused President Obama of putting politics before border enforcement:

The president does not want to fix the problem. The president supports the surges in illegal alien children and other illegal aliens coming to our country again because he sees this as the equivalent of a Democratic Party voter registration drive (Hayes 2014a).

Three days later, Congressional Republicans put out a statement indicating that there were "steps" President Obama could take "to secure our borders and ensure these children are returned swiftly and safely to their countries" (Matthews 2014a). That same day Fox News hosts reiterated the Republic's border security discourse. Tucker Carlson, a Fox News host, similarly stated that Democrats favor "unrestricted illegal immigration" because they want to grow "their voter base" (Wallace 2014). Lou Dobbs, a political commentator on Fox News, espoused the preposterous idea that Mexican drug cartels "control" the U.S.-Mexico Border, and Bill O'Reilly, a popular show host on Fox News, suggested the need of a wall on the southern border as formidable as the Berlin Wall and the barriers put in place by Israel (O'Reilly 2014b). Nearly a month later, Bill O'Reilly called on President Obama to make "the southern border impenetrable to illegal aliens, drug smugglers and terrorists" (O'Reilly 2014a). Elites framed border security as a serious problem that only Republicans were willing to address.

In response to Democratic politicians' proposals calling for the adequate funding of temporary housing facilities for unaccompanied minors, members of the Republican Party proposed a bill that included numerous initiatives to further secure the U.S.-Mexico border. According to Senator Marco Rubio of Florida, he and many of his fellow Republicans saw the need for more "manpower", "the construction of strategic fencing", and "the deployment of specific technologies like ground sensors, and cameras, and drones, and so forth to secure the southern border with Mexico" (Wallace 2014). The Republicans' proposed bill also included funds for U.S. states that share a border with Mexico. As Congresswoman Michele Bachmann

of Minnesota explained: "We [Republicans] are funding the states who [sic] are going to put National Guard on their borders so they will have the ability to be able to actually secure their borders" (Wallace 2014). Even though the children were not sneaking into the U.S., but were instead going up to border enforcement agents and asking for asylum, elites with conservative political views pointed at the number of unaccompanied minors as evidence that the border was not secure. More to the point, at a time when the border was more secure than ever before and there were no documented accounts of unauthorized entry by foreign terrorists along the border, the elite argued both rhetorically and in proposed legislation that the U.S.-Mexico border needed fortification.¹⁴

Texas Governor Rick Perry, who ran in the 2012 Republican Party's presidential primary, also tried to shift the focus from the unaccompanied minors to border security, which he described as a concern to Texans and a failure of President Obama's administration. He stated: "I'm the governor of the state of Texas. My citizens' safety is what is foremost here. And it hasn't got anything to do with anything other than those numbers of individuals who are coming across the border" (Crowley 2014). According to Governor Perry, greater border enforcement was necessary because of the drug violence at the border, and because some of the unauthorized migrants detained in the recent past "are from countries that have substantial terrorist ties" –a spurious claim that conflates the geopolitics of the U.S.-Mexico border and national security (ibid.). He, therefore, announced plans to send 1,000 National Guard troops from his state to the Texas-Mexico border, explaining: "What we're asking the National Guard to do is to be a force multiplier" (Karl 2014b). Governor Perry's words and actions, however, did not prove discursively compelling.

Perry's narrative of danger along the border was unequivocally rejected by many Texan border communities and critics across the country. The McAllen Texas Chamber of Commerce, which feared the deployment would keep Mexicans from crossing into Texas to shop, sent him a letter asking that he "[should] reconsider the deployment" because of "the damage that will result to our community and the economy of the entire Rio Grande Valley" (Green 2014). It seems that for political expediency Governor Perry chose to ignore what border residents know all too well –that, as Anzaldúa (1987) astutely observes, "To survive the Borderlands / you must live *sin fronteras* / be a crossroads" (195). Nationally, Perry's proposed deployment of troops who cannot lawfully detain unauthorized migrants as the political theater of a politician with presidential ambitions was panned. More to the point,

¹⁴ See Maddow 2014.

critics dubbed Perry's plan, with a cost of \$12 million, "Operation Symbolic Act" (Karl 2014b).

Perhaps responding to political pressures and the security discourse, the Obama Administration sent an additional 200 border patrol agents and boats to the border at the end of July. By then, the number of minors being detained had already declined significantly following diplomatic work in Central America¹⁵ (Karl 2014a) and the Mexican government's greater enforcement of its southern border, which "may be viewed as a 'thickening' of the U.S.-Mexico border, with Mexico becoming a buffer zone" (Andreas 2003: 10). The additional agents and the decrease in unaccompanied minors did not appease elites. They continued to contribute to the discursive construction of unaccompanied minors as a foreign threat. In August, even fewer unaccompanied minors were arriving at the U.S.-Mexico border and tens of dozens had been deported, and still Congressman John Fleming of Louisiana discursively likened the increased number of unaccompanied minors to a deadly national disaster, describing them as "a tsunami of humans" (Wallace 2014).

Conclusion

Our findings suggest that in the United States, during the summer of 2014, social and political elites with conservative political views socially constructed the migrant children who traveled from Central America to the U.S.-Mexico border as a problem more than as a humanitarian crisis. Additionally, like other scholars,¹⁶ we found that these elites used speech acts to construct unauthorized migrants as a danger in order to promulgate a discourse rooted in the notion that the border is a security-vulnerability in need of attention. The migrant children were partly framed as uncivilized, criminal threats to public health, and to the social, cultural, and moral orders within the U.S. This rhetorical depiction, which utilized xenophobic stereotypes, demands that a geopolitical boundary separates the U.S. and Mexico. Consequently, it seems that as long as unauthorized migrants from south of the U.S.-Mexico border are constructed as undesirables in the U.S. public's imagination, the call for an impenetrable geopolitical boundary will continue.

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¹⁵ See Karl 2014a.

¹⁶ See Newman 2006; Ackleson 2005.

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