Undeserving and Undesirable: Representing New Migrants and Refugees in Costa Rican Media

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Since 2014, Costa Rica has faced a ‘migration crisis’ tied to the arrival of new asylum seekers from El Salvador, Venezuela and Colombia and transit migrants from Africa, Haiti and Cuba. This article examines representations of these groups through a qualitative analysis of newspaper coverage (2011–2017). Representations of these groups build on existing threat narratives to position transit migrants and asylum seekers as inherently dangerous, undeserving of public concern, and a drain on Costa Rican hospitality. These framings reinforce social and political boundaries and justify the exclusion of migrants and refugees from public resources.

Keywords: Costa Rica, immigrant threat narratives, media representations, refugees, transit migration, xenophobia.

Costa Rica has long been a destination for Latin American migrants, but since 2014, the country has faced a series of new ‘migration crises’ with increasing asylum applications (from Salvadorans, Venezuelans, and Colombians) and the arrivals of large groups of transit migrants (composed primarily of Cubans, Africans, and Haitians) en route to North America. The visibility of these new migrants shifted discourses of exclusion and crisis around migration. The country has a long history of xenophobia: Nicaraguans, the largest immigrant group in Costa Rica, have been the subject of threat narratives that position them as violent criminals and abusers of public services (Sandoval García, 2002). Such discourses reinforce links between migrant illegality, violence, and crime and are enshrined in public policies that target these low-income migrants (Fouratt, 2014). However, little attention has focused on the discourses that follow new refugees and migrants through the region.

Examining the framings of ‘migration crises’ contributes to understanding how hierarchies of credibility, legitimacy, and deservingness emerge and circulate within host countries. This article examines how Costa Rican newspapers link new migrant groups to pervasive narratives of insecurity and crime. First, it situates the analysis within the broader context of media representations of migration and describes the methodology employed. Then, it outlines recent shifts in migration and analyses key themes that emerged in coverage of new migrant groups. By building on fears of invasion and regional security threats as well as pervasive discourses of immigrant criminality, the
media represent these new groups as ‘preemptive suspects’ (Stephen, 2018), dangerous, undesirable, and undeserving of public concern. Such representations ultimately reinforce calls for immigration restrictions and negate public empathy for migrants.

Representing Migration

News media shape how the public think about who belongs in the ‘imagined community’ of the nation through discourses of inclusion and otherness (Anderson, 1991). They influence the public’s understanding of the social environment, inform policymakers, and help create the reality they report by contributing to public consensus about events and issues (Dijk, 1989). For example, simply by covering some topics and events more than others, the news influences perceptions of what issues are important (McCombs and Shaw, 1972; Baumgartner and Jones, 2010). Analyses of immigration news in the US, Europe, and elsewhere have shown that as media coverage of a particular issue increases, so does public perception of the issue’s importance (Boomgaarden and Vliegenthart, 2007; Dunaway, Branton and Abrajano, 2010; Burscher, van Spanje and de Vreese, 2015). Media provides a framework through which the public understands how immigration relates to the national imaginary and tends to focus on the various kinds of threats immigrants represent to host nations. By making certain images and imaginaries of migration visible, the media have ‘associated [migration] with certain discourses and images that in their moment have been convenient for certain groups in power’ (Marroquín Parducci, 2008).

In many immigrant-receiving countries, media representations increasingly have reinforced negative attitudes and stereotypes about immigrants (Esses, Medianu and Lawson, 2013). By representing and reconstructing attitudes and ideas about migrants, the media contribute to the production of anti-immigrant attitudes and the construction of racist ideologies and practices (Quinsaat, 2014). Scholars have noted that the attention paid to minorities and immigrants in news media is limited, except when they are portrayed as deviant or associated with crime, violence, or illegality (Dijk, 1989; Brenes Montoya, 2010). For example, the ‘Latino threat narrative’ analysed by Chavez (2008) figures Latino immigrants as a cultural, racial, and security threat to the United States. Underlying such threat narratives are perceived threats to the meaning of national belonging in the face of social, economic, and demographic changes in host countries (Danso and McDonald, 2001; El Refaie, 2001; Klockner and Dunn, 2003; Chavez, 2008). Such discourses undermine immigrant claims for inclusion by dehumanising immigrants and positioning them as outsiders. This dehumanisation occurs through figurative language that links migrants to animals, water, disaster, pollution, and disease or infection (Santa Ana, 1999, 2002; Ono and Sloop, 2002; Shah and Thornton, 2003; Bohon and MacPherson Parrott, 2011; Diaz McConnell, 2011). Like waves or floods, immigrants are often portrayed as unstoppable and out of control. However, Alsina (2003: 99) has argued that the media do not simply create ‘convenient’ representations of migrants, but rather these portrayals emerge from historical discourses linked to a society’s ‘collective imaginary’.

In Costa Rica, hegemonic discourses of national identity emphasise Costa Ricans’ ‘whiteness’, the universal welfare system, and the country’s exceptionalism in the region (Giglioli, 1996). Since the 1990s, though, this myth of exceptionality has been threatened by a series of financial and social security crises in the landmark institutions of the Costa Rican welfare state: universal public education and healthcare (Solís, 2010).
In this crisis, Nicaraguan immigrants became scapegoats for crowded schools and under-resourced hospitals and clinics. Widespread public opinion and media representations depict these migrants as causing the deterioration of public institutions (Bonilla-Carrión, 2007; Brenes Montoya, 2010; Voorend and Venegas, 2014). Further, a heightened attention to perceptions of rising crime and insecurity permeates print and television media in Costa Rica, again blaming immigrants (Vergara, 2016). The media construct the urgency and magnitude of this immigrant threat through language that emphasises the ‘invasion’, ‘flooding’, and ‘bombardment’ of the body of the nation by ‘illegal’ immigrants (Fonseca Vindas and Sandoval Garcia, 2006).

While tropes of undeservingness and threat based on racialised and criminalised images of Nicaraguan immigrants pervade the Costa Rican media, specific representations of other migrant groups have largely escaped analysis. Prior to 2014, there were low numbers and little visibility of other migrant groups. However, changing regional migration dynamics have led to increased media representations of forced migrants moving to and through the country. As scholars have noted with respect to refugees, media discourses serve to distinguish between those deserving and undeserving of public concern, state recognition, and resources (Holmes and Castañeda, 2016). For example, Bloemraad, de Graauw, and Hamlin (2015) found positive media representation of official refugees in the United States in the early 2000s. However, others have noted that the same discourses used to criminalise and dehumanise economic migrants are employed to delegitimise refugee claims (Esses, Mediano and Lawson, 2013). Such discourses serve to position even the most ‘worthy’ refugees as ‘preemptive suspects’, that is, as ‘intrinsically dangerous […] and/or as having fewer rights and less value than others’ (Stephen, 2018: 8). In examining coverage of asylum seekers and transit migrants, we seek to understand how new migrants are subject to such ‘tropes of deservingness and difference’ (Holmes and Castañeda, 2016: 2).

Methods

This analysis of newspaper representations emerges from long-term ethnographic research on migration in Costa Rica. While interviewing government officials and NGO workers between 2015 and 2017, we became interested in how officials talked about asylum seekers versus transit migrants. As such, we took an ethnographic approach to collecting and analysing news articles. One thousand and eighty newspaper articles published between 2011 and 2017 were collected from four of the six major daily print newspapers in Costa Rica (La Nación, Diario Extra, La República, and La Prensa Libre). These newspapers include not only the most popular daily newspapers (La Nación and Diario Extra), but also range from papers targeted at an educated, elite public (La República) to sensationalist tabloids (Diario Extra). We restricted the publication dates of articles to 2011–2017 in order to see coverage of new migrant groups and related topics before recent changes in migration dynamics.

We used a theoretically informed sampling focused on identifying and capturing the range of news coverage about new migrant groups (Altheide and Schneider, 2013), beginning with articles mentioning the nationalities in question and other terms related to migration (i.e. ‘refugee’ and ‘border’) for each year under consideration. Articles about Nicaraguans were excluded because extensive research has been conducted on their
representation in the media (Sandoval García, 2002; Fonseca Vindas and Sandoval García, 2006; Campos Zamora and Tristán Jiménez, 2009; Brenes Montoya, 2010). Further, 2018 saw the sudden arrival of 50,000 Nicaraguan refugees, a situation beyond the scope of the present article.

We then conducted an ethnographic content analysis, an approach to qualitative content analysis that seeks to identify patterns and themes in texts, combining identification and quantitative counts of themes with a focus on meanings of themes and how broader discourses are constructed (Mayring, 2004; Altheide and Schneider, 2013). Articles were initially coded in NVivo by publication, year, main subject, nationalities represented, overall categorical frame/tone, and themes. Under categorical frame/tone, articles were categorised as representing migrants positively (beneficial, victim) or negatively (problem), or other/ambiguous (Bleich et al., 2015). Beneficial frames are categorised as positive because they portray migrants as contributing to society and evoke support for the group. Likewise, victim frames, though representing migrants as passive, tend to generate sympathy. In contrast, problem frames are negative in tone because they evoke ‘fear or animosity’ towards the group represented (Bleich et al., 2015: 948). However, many articles presented a mixed framing; of 233 articles representing migrants either in a beneficial light or as victims, 122 also framed migrants as creating problems in Costa Rica. Across newspapers, the dominant tone of coverage was of migrants as problems, ranging from 78 percent in Prensa Libre to 88.5 percent of Diario Extra articles (Table 1). This is in keeping with previous research, which has found that the attention paid to minorities and immigrants in news media is limited, except when they are portrayed as problematic or associated with crime and violence (Dijk, 1989; Brenes Montoya, 2010).

We conducted an iterative analysis, beginning with a short list of pre-determined codes and basic themes informed by previous research, and allowed additional themes to emerge from the data (Hardy, Harley and Phillips, 2004; Altheide and Schneider, 2013). Two members of the research team coded each article, and coding discrepancies were resolved in team meetings. Following a thematic network approach (Attride-Stirling, 2001), connections among basic themes were examined to identify larger organising themes or frames. The results include not only counts of these basic and organising themes but also a qualitative analysis of how these themes are produced, taking note of framing devices such as metaphors, catchphrases, the use of statistics, and sources (Quinsaat, 2014). The three most prominent organising frames that emerged from the data are analysed below: crisis at the borders (501 articles), migrants as linked to crime and insecurity (447 articles), and migrants as a cost or burden to Costa Rica (235 articles).
The Making of a Migration Crisis

Although there is a long history of migrants from outside Latin America using overland routes through the Americas to reach the United States, this migration has increased significantly over the past ten years thanks to increasing restrictions and shifting policies in the United States and Europe. In 2014, more than 5,000 Cubans passed through Costa Rica; in 2015 that number doubled (Acuña et al., 2018). Between November 2015 and mid-2016, a series of events covered in the national media served to make this migration highly visible and solidify public discourse around a ‘migration’ or ‘border crisis’. In November 2015, Costa Rican Migration Police dismantled a migrant smuggling ring, leaving thousands of Cubans without a way to continue their journey and drawing public attention to transit migration. Costa Rica issued special transit permits, but at the northern border, Nicaragua refused them entry. Around 10,000 Cubans would be stranded for months until Costa Rica and Mexico, with support from international organisations, organised an airlift program (Acuña et al., 2018).

Through narratives about these events, newspapers framed and interpreted the ‘migration crisis’ for a Costa Rican public who had little direct contact with Cuban and African migrants at the borders. The events of November and December 2015 feature prominently in the newspaper coverage analysed here, accounting for 13.7 percent of all articles analysed and 67 percent of all articles for 2015. Indeed, there were as many articles about migration in those two months as in all of 2011–2014 combined (Figures 1 and 2). In April 2016, when the airlift program ended, coverage again turned to migrants stranded at the border, who were increasingly French-speaking West Africans and Haitians. According to government statistics, 18,441 special transit permits were emitted just between June 2016 and January 2017, most going to migrants from Sub-Saharan Africa (Unidad de Comunicación, 2017). Although labelled by media and politicians as transit migrants, Cubans, Haitians, and Africans remained in the country – often in camps in the border regions – for many months, sometimes even years, waiting for legal, financial, and other resources to continue North. In 2016, the numbers of those stranded at the northern border actually outnumbered the number of Colombian refugees in Costa Rica, making transit migrants the second largest group of foreigners in the country, even though they neither planned to stay nor had legal status (Mora Izaguirre, 2018: 50).

During this same period, arrivals of refugees and asylum seekers also increased dramatically. Previously, Costa Rica received a small flow of fewer than 1,000 asylum seekers annually from Colombia and elsewhere (DGME, 2012). However, asylum applications doubled each year between 2015 and 2017, due to arrivals from El Salvador and Venezuela. Overall, applications hovered around 1,000 until 2014, but jumped to 4,460 in 2016 and over 7,000 in 2017 (GESO and Dirección de Integración y Desarrollo Humano, 2017; DGME, 2018). Still, despite this dramatic increase in asylum applicants, groups associated with refugees received much less coverage than transit migrants. Of the 765 articles that explicitly mention migrants’ nationalities, just over one-third refer to groups associated with asylum seekers, namely Colombians, Salvodorans, and Venezuelans, while about two-thirds refer to Cuban, African, and Haitian transit migrants.

Although media coverage of these groups decreased in 2017, transit migration and asylum applications have not slowed. Rather, governments of the region are coordinating more effectively on migration and border controls (Secretaria de Comunicación, 2019), slowing the pace of those attempting to move through the region and creating new points where migrants become ‘stuck’. Further, as one migration official asserted, migrants and
coyotes are finding new routes around official controls (Interview 1, 2017). Given that such migration appears to be the new normal for the region, it is critical to understand the role of the media in framing public discourse about these migrant groups.

**Crisis at the Border**

Both during and after the events of 2015, media coverage of transit migrants used the language of ‘crisis’ to represent their arrival in Costa Rica. This ‘crisis’ was constructed not only through explicit use of the word ‘crisis’, but also through the use of numbers, statistics, and water metaphors of flows, waves, and surges that emphasised the magnitude and urgency of the situation. Two-hundred articles use numbers or statistics to highlight the magnitude of migration flows, from a few hundred arriving at the southern border each day (EFE, 2016) to estimates of thousands or tens of thousands of migrants moving through the country and the region (Mata Blanco, 2016b). About half of these articles use figurative language that links migrants to water, describing migrants as waves and surges that saturate the border. Headlines, such as ‘Oleada of migrants becomes unstoppable at the southern border’, create a sense of both urgency and danger.
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(Sequeira, 2016b). The term *oleada*, used in over 100 articles, describes a large wave, surge, or flood. The article continues, ‘The flow of irregular migrants became unstoppable at the southern border, where hundreds of persons enter each day requesting a temporary permit and overflowing, by a lot, the government’s capacity.’ In descriptions such as these, words like ‘flows’, ‘waves’, and ‘overflowing’ reinforce the use of numbers like ‘hundreds’ to represent migration as an unstoppable natural disaster. A few months later the same author would refer to transit migrants as a ‘human avalanche’ overrunning the border and the government’s capacity to control them (Mata Blanco, 2016c).

In these depictions, as migrants approach the national territory, they ‘saturate’, ‘pile up’, or ‘pressure the border’ (Cambronero and Sequeira, 2016). Further, after forcing their way across the country, transit migrants ‘accumulate’ at the northern border or become *varados* (stuck or stranded), a term used in one-third of the articles covering the border crisis to describe transit migrants unable to continue their journey north (Mata Blanco, Cambronero and Oviedo, 2015). What emerges is a picture of large, out-of-control crowds invading the national territory, resulting in what a number of articles describe as ‘chaos’ (Sequeira, 2016a).

Such depictions not only emphasise the magnitude and urgency of the crisis Costa Rica faces, but also aggregate individual migrants and refugees into one undifferentiated mass, thereby dehumanising them (Santa Ana, 2002). Migrants become not people, but numbers, statistics, or an unstoppable force of nature. Further, the media rarely mention the country of origin of African migrants at the border, despite the fact that these migrants come from a number of countries in Sub-Saharan and French-speaking West Africa (Unidad de Comunicación, 2017). Instead, coverage lumps them together as simply ‘Africans’ or ‘extracontinental’ migrants, aggregating them by their race and their origins outside the region.

Indeed, Black Africans and Haitians are conflated through a trope of disguised Haitians. Eighteen percent of articles that mention Haitians also repeat a government claim that the majority of Black transit migrants are Haitians disguised as Africans. At the time, Haitians were not eligible for special transit permits and so, according to officials quoted in the media, they attempted to pass for Africans to avoid deportation. In a *La Nación* article, the Minister of Foreign Affairs is quoted, ‘Each time we see that they are not Africans, rather they are Haitians, in a percentage greater than 95 percent […] They all say they are Africans’ (quoted in Cambronero, 2016). Public officials in the news and in our research interviews repeated this 95 percent figure of disguised Haitians (Interview 2, 2018). This trope serves to reinforce the conflation of all Black migrants while simultaneously positioning them as deceitful, dishonest, and ‘conveniently lying’ (Sequeira, 2016b).

This framing of Black migrants as deceitful is deepened through additional representations of them as defiant or as ‘mocking’ border controls and officials (Mata Blanco, 2016a), as leaving trash and human waste in border communities (*Diario Extra*, 2016), blocking roads, and facing off with authorities (*La Prensa Libre*, 2016a). African and Haitian migrants are also represented as carrying diseases including malaria (Méndez, 2016b), tuberculosis (Cascante, 2016b; Méndez, 2016a; Rojas, 2016), and potentially even Ebola (Estrada, 2014). Such depictions of African and Haitian transit migrants as creating problems and contributing to the chaos at the border make up an additional 19.5 percent of articles about these groups beyond the representations of invasion, water metaphors, and the conflation of Black migrants. Such representations are in direct contrast with articles highlighting Cubans’ levels of education (Ávalos, 2015) and contributions to maintaining migrant shelters (*Diario Extra*, 2015).
Underlying these contrasting representations is an implicit discourse of racial difference, often glossed over as ‘cultural differences’ in the media. One article makes these differences explicit, paraphrasing the mayor of a local border town in describing the town’s conflicts with African and Haitian migrants:

The mayor claimed that it is very different what they went through with the Cubans, principally because there wasn’t a language barrier, plus, they [the Cubans], like good Latinos, were cheerful and joking, with a different cultural level. (Jiménez Saénz, 2016)

According to the article, Africans and Haitians wander the streets causing riots. Such tropes of defiant, uncivilised, and dangerous Black migrants build on racialised stereotypes associated with Afro-Costa Rican populations (Sharman, 2001).

**Costs to the State**

However, these representations of transit migrants as dangerous exist in tension with other depictions of them as vulnerable populations requiring aid. Over 60 percent of the articles that frame migrants as victims depict transit migrants fleeing poverty and hunger and facing a dangerous journey to the United States. While nominally these articles frame migrants as victims, the emphasis is less on the suffering of migrants and more on the ‘first aid and humanitarian assistance’ provided by Costa Rica (Jiménez Saénz, 2015). From border police handing out food to hungry Africans (Ruiz, 2016), to localities going out of their way to welcome Cubans (Noguera, 2016), and communities working to meet religious dietary restrictions of Muslim migrants (MataBlanco, 2016d), Costa Rican institutions, officials, and communities are described as ‘exemplary’ (*La Prensa Libre*, 2016b). Holmes and Castaneda (2016: 8) have noted with respect to discourses around refugees in Europe that ‘the subject position of the hero is open only to those positioned as European or North American, primarily leaders in the state or civil society’. In this case, the media positions not only Costa Rican leaders as heroes, but the people or nation itself, reinforcing notions of citizen democracy and equality.

However, this hospitality comes at a cost. Just as the use of statistics and numbers reinforces the magnitude and urgency of transit migration, articles that detail the monetary cost of humanitarian assistance emphasise the amount of resources transit migrants use. One hundred and twenty-three articles detail the costs to the Costa Rican Red Cross, National Emergency Commission, and the Caja Costarricense de Seguro Social (CCSS popularly known as Caja, the Costa Rican Social Security Fund) of providing food, shelter, and healthcare to transit migrants. For example, an article from *Prensa Libre* asserts that ‘The Caja has used 46 million colones on sick migrants’ in the first six months of 2016 (Cascante, 2016a). The steep cost to Costa Rica is reinforced by those statistics highlighting large numbers of migrants and by quoting institutional actors about the growing urgency of migrants’ needs. For example, a 2016 *La Nación* article quotes claims by an International Organization for Migration (IOM) official that the number of migrants exceeds Costa Rica’s capacity for hospitality: ‘Costa Rica has been very generous but now it’s overwhelmed’ (*La Nación*, 2016). The article emphasises this ‘excess’ through statistics about the increasing numbers of migrants arriving as well as the ‘deplorable’ conditions they encounter in Costa Rica. Here, the crisis emerges as one of limited resources and capacity of Costa Rica.

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Thus, overall, this framing of migrants in need of aid is ambivalent – the news media simultaneously conjures sympathy for transit migrants by representing them as suffering from poverty and hunger and represents them as problematic for using public resources. Indeed, discourses about migrants using up or draining resources circulate widely in popular and political discourse, blaming Nicaraguan migrants in particular for abusing public services (Sandoval García, 2002; Bonilla-Carrión, 2007). The repetition of this discourse with respect to transit migrants serves to reinforce their undeservingness, particularly in light of their temporary presence in the country.

**Refugees or Regional Security Threats?**

While transit migrants are subject to ambivalent discourses around their arrival and use of public resources, nationalities associated with asylum seekers are framed in terms of crime and insecurity, with a few notable exceptions. A few articles explicitly represent refugees as beneficial to Costa Rica, emphasising their cultural and culinary contributions. However, most of the articles positively representing these groups are not of refugees themselves but rather of celebrities or athletes visiting Costa Rica. Colombian and Venezuelan singers, models, actors, and athletes all feature in the Culture sections of newspapers (Chaves González, 2013; Molina, 2014; Rojas, 2015; Sanabria, 2016; Díaz Zeledón, 2017). Fifteen of the 27 articles positively representing Venezuelans focus on the tragic killing of a visiting Venezuelan competitive runner by a drunk driver in 2017, rather than covering Venezuelan refugees or migrants.

Instead, overwhelmingly, the media links groups associated with asylum seekers to crime and insecurity. Articles linking migrants to crime including narco-trafficking, gangs, guns, violence, and illegality represent 41 percent of all articles analysed. The term ‘illegal’ is commonly used in Costa Rican media to link Nicaraguan migrants to crime (Sandoval García, 2002). In the coverage analysed here, the term is used to stigmatise both transit migrants and groups associated with asylum seekers. ‘Illegal’ appears more frequently than less stigmatising terms like ‘irregular’ and ‘undocumented’ in articles referencing all migrant groups. Further, about 40 percent of articles that use the terms ‘undocumented’ or ‘irregular’ also use ‘illegal’ to describe the same migrants. There is also a slippage in use of the term in all newspapers from describing unauthorised border entry to referring to migrants themselves as ‘illegal’, as in the headline in *La República*, ‘Legislators endorse the use of police force at border with Panama to prevent the entry of illegals’ (Arrieta, 2016). The media’s use of the term ‘illegal’ as a noun serves to highlight the connection between migrants and criminality, stigmatising and dehumanising them (De Genova, 2004).

Discourses of illegality in the media reinforce government rhetoric and justify policing measures. In reference to transit migrants, this emphasises their illegitimate entry and presence in the country. For groups associated with asylum seekers, an emphasis on ‘illegality’ likewise serves to question their legitimacy and link them to criminal activity. This link between migrant criminality and illegality is reinforced by quoting government officials at the highest levels. Both the Minister of Security, Gustavo Mata, and police officials are quoted or paraphrased as using the term (Méndez, 2014; Cambronero and Sequeira, 2016). Mata, for example, states ‘we are showing a reality […] which is the use of public transportation, taxis, or buses to mobilise illegal migrants, what we need to do is increase the policing in the area’ (Cambronero and Sequeira, 2016). Here, the media
uncritically repeats government justifications of increased police and security measures.

The link is strengthened in a 2017 *Prensa Libre* article that quotes then-President Solís:

Solís used ‘undesirables’ to refer to those foreigners who enter the national territory and have criminal antecedents, and whose purpose is to alter the social peace of Costa Rica. […] ‘When you start to see them, you’re going to see them in the airport, and they’re going to *ir jalando* [go away, slang]. That’s what’s going to happen,’ he said. The President urged the need for the Seizure of Assets bill to combat and fight against organised crime and narco-trafficking. ‘I prefer not to speculate; some are suspects and others are not. By the way, the Asset Seizure law would serve precisely to achieve the objective of getting rid of this *montón* (ton) of undesirables.’ (Grana-dos, 2017b)

While the article does not single out a single nationality, the link between foreigners and crime is clear. Even more importantly, through Solís’s quote and the emphasis on the Asset Seizure bill, the article links migrants not just to general criminality but also to international organised crime and narco-trafficking.

Indeed, coverage of Salvadorans and Colombians relies on tropes of *maras* (transnational gangs) and narco-trafficking, linking regional security threats to pervasive national concerns with crime and immigration. For example, of the 69 articles dealing with Salvadorans, 24 (34.8 percent) represent them as refugees or asylum seekers, while 39 (56.5 percent) link them to *maras*. Of course, there is cross-over; eight articles report on cases of gang members applying for asylum. Such coverage emphasises the dangers of transnational *maras* infiltrating Costa Rica and of dangerous gang members taking advantage of the asylum process. Take for example, the 2017 *Diario Extra* headline, ‘Kills 2 and Asks for Refuge in Costa Rica’, which details how a Salvadoran gang member killed two rivals and then ‘fled’ to Costa Rica to use it as ‘hideout’ (Mora, 2017). In conjunction with wider coverage of *maras* such articles plant the seeds of suspicion that all Salvadorans are gang members, rather than legitimate refugees. The focus is not on refugees fleeing gangs, but rather on the danger Salvadorans pose as potential gang members.

Similarly, 63 percent of articles depicting Colombians link them directly to drugs, narco-trafficking, and organised crime. From articles about narco-trafficking routes that flow through Costa Rica (Fallas, 2017), to money laundering (Monge, 2016), such coverage emphasises Colombians’ criminal activity. Even when Colombians appear in the news as victims of violence, their deaths are linked to their participation in criminal enterprises. Indeed, of the twenty articles that frame Colombians as victims, nine-teen are about Colombians whose murders were directly or indirectly linked to drugs and narco-trafficking. For example, a *Diario Extra* article describes the murder of a 38-year-old Colombian, Alex Quintero, killed by hitmen (Chinchilla, 2014). After relating salacious details of the motorcycle chase and murder, the article ends by emphasising that Quintero had many entries and exits on his passport, always used a private jet, and had been investigated by US authorities. Quintero’s involvement in narco-trafficking overshadows any possible framing of him as victim. Key here is that these Salvadoran and Colombian criminal threats go beyond existing discourses that link Nicaraguan migrants to crime by emphasising the transnational nature of gangs and drug trafficking. In such accounts, Costa Rica emerges as a key site for the transit of people (Retana, 2017), drugs (*La Nación*, 2014), and money (Monge, 2016) in the region as international organised crime, led by foreigners, ‘evades’ and ‘mocks’ Costa Rican
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authorities (Granados, 2017a). The police are portrayed as enforcing law and order at the same time that the state is shown as incapable of stopping dangerous elements from entering national territory.

Conclusion

News coverage of both asylum seekers and transit migrants represents them as outsiders who are, as Lynn Stephen (2018) argues, ‘preemptive suspects’, viewed as inherently dangerous and undeserving of public concern. These framings build on pervasive ideas of race, class, national identity, and regional stereotypes. Thus, Black Africans and Haitians are seen as dangerous and deceptive, Colombians as tied to narco-trafficking, and Salvadorans as gang members. Through their disrespect for Costa Rican border and immigration controls and their links to organised crime, these migrants are positioned as largely undeserving of Costa Rican public resources. In contrast, Venezuelan asylum seekers, many of whom are middle-class professionals, are represented as relatively unproblematic and receive little coverage in the media.

Marked as undeserving and dangerous, transit migrants are represented as passive recipients of the nation’s humanitarian spirit and financial resources. The media describe them as literally ‘stuck’ at the borders, immobile despite their definition as migrants, people who move. In contrast, Costa Rica emerges as active and heroic, as government officials, citizens, and local communities offer hospitality and a humanitarian reception for migrants. Such discourses serve to reinforce national narratives of Costa Rican exceptionalism, particularly when contrasted with portrayals of other countries’ responses. In particular, over 300 of the articles examined criticised the role of Nicaragua in generating the border crisis. In line with a long history of border disputes between Costa Rica and Nicaragua, these representations reinforce public and political discourses of Costa Rica’s legal and moral superiority (Sandoval García, 2012).

At the same time, discourses of Costa Rican generosity emphasise the threat that these migrants pose to key national institutions. The media represent Costa Rica’s response as an ambivalent welcome through tropes that mark all immigrants as users and abusers of social services and state resources. These discourses justify increasing border and policing measures to combat the threats posed by both transit migrants and refugees. This simultaneous and contradictory logic of humanitarianism and securitisation is visible not only in the media, but also in attempts to limit access to healthcare, increased border patrols, and temporary visas that increase state surveillance and control (Sandoval García, 2015; Winters and Mora Izaguirre, 2019).

Examining media framings of ‘migration crises’ shows how the news media contribute to discourses that reinforce social and political boundaries and distinguish between those deserving and undeserving of public concern. Almost absent from the traditional news media, but vital here, are the ways in which migrants themselves contest these portrayals, problematising dichotomies of deserving and undeserving. Very few of the articles we examined highlighted the voices or perspectives of migrants and refugees themselves. Instead, the news reinforces official government discourses and widespread negative perceptions of some groups and leaves others, like Venezuelans, largely invisible.

A growing number of alternative representations circulate on social media alongside misinformation and rumours about migrants in Costa Rica. Future research should
turn to social media and its role in reinforcing or challenging the discourses represented in mainstream news. In our ethnographic work, we have seen how asylum seekers and migrant advocacy organisations work to disrupt discourses of undeservingness and undesirability through social media campaigns. Yet, given the media’s focus on problems and crises, it will be difficult for such efforts effectively to reshape widespread negative framings of migrants.

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