Water Metaphors, Illegalized Migrants, and Canadian Tolerance: Media Coverage of Asylum Seekers in August 2017

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Abstract

Building upon recent scholarly trends that have used critical media analysis to study migration-related issues, this paper reflects on Canadian national news coverage of asylum seekers from August 1st-September 1st 2017. During this period, there was an increase of mostly Haitian asylum seekers entering Canada through the Quebec/New York border. This paper historicizes some of the motivating factors in this migration, and describes how these asylum seekers were linguistically framed in 35 articles from *The Globe and Mail* and *National Post*. This research suggests that coverage within this period rationalizes securitization measures against asylum seekers using two specific language tools: 1) the metaphorical description of migration and migrants as 'water' (through language such as 'wave', 'surge', 'flow', etc.); and 2) the inaccurate and laden use of the term 'illegal' to criminalize asylum seekers and the process of irregular migration. In contrast to familiar rhetoric of Canada's "goodwill" and "tolerance" as a host nation for migrants, this paper analyzes how migrants who enter Canada irregularly have discursively been constructed as threats to Canadian sovereignty and border control, and the practical and human rights implications of this framing.

Introduction

In recent years, as the numbers of global refugees increased from 10.4 million in 2012 to 25.4 million in 2018, Canada has been the subject of global praise for its resettlement of Syrian refugees (Tyyskä et al., 2017; UNHRC, 2018). Rhetoric of "tolerance" and "goodwill" towards migrants often characterizes Canada's refugee history and resettlement programs. However, this celebration of Canada's refugee programs belies the reality of increasingly securitized practices towards in-land asylum seekers, especially following changes to legislation in 2012 under the Harper administration (Arbel & Brenner, 2013; Atak, Hudson, & Nakache, 2018; Crépeau, François and Nakache, 2006). This legislation, including the Protecting Canada's Immigration System Act (2012), contains a number of restrictive measures that apply specifically to in-land asylum seekers, including the growing use of socio-economic deterrents and increased migrant detention (Atak et al., 2018, p. 2). Often, the language of security is used by the government to rationalize these measures, drawing upon discursively constructed subjectivities that posit asylum seekers as "queue jumpers", "threats" to public security, and/or "drains" on public resources (Huot, Bobadilla, Bailliard, & Laliberte Rudman, 2016).

Building upon this understanding, this essay analyzes the discursive elements of Canadian news media coverage of in-land asylum seekers from August 1st-September 1st 2017. This temporal period reflects an increase of mostly Haitian asylum seekers irregularly crossing from the United States (US) into Canada. I argue that national media within this period rationalizes securitization measures against these individuals and communities through two specific language tools that dehumanize and decontextualize the process of migration: as metaphorically linked to water, and as intrinsically dangerous criminals. As such, this essay reflects upon the limits of Canadian "tolerance" and "goodwill", and argues that this data reflects

an insecurity and obsession with Canadian borders, as asylum seekers that enter Canadian territory through irregular entry-points are at odds with traditional ideas of sovereignty and border control. Regardless of the policies and contexts that force irregular entry into Canada, the discursive use of water metaphors and illegality create fear over the vulnerability of the Canadian border, and lay bare the inherent limitations and inconsistencies of Canadian "generosity" towards migrants. If Canadian "tolerance" is limited to particular groups of migrants that enter Canada in a particularly mediated way, then the very nature of "tolerance" must come under question as representing exclusionary, rather than inclusionary, practices and beliefs.

Context

Before summarizing my findings, I will provide a brief note on definitions. First, the term "in-land asylum seeker" refers to an individual who may meet the standards of qualification for a Conventional refugee, but whose request for sanctuary has yet to be processed. In short, an in-land asylum seeker is an individual who has applied for asylum from within the host country and is waiting for a decision as to whether or not they will be recognized as a refugee (Barrett, 2018, p. 27). Second, "irregular border crossings" are defined by the Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada as individuals crossing the Canada-US border between official ports of entry; official ports of entry are selected by the Government of Canada, and are usually at an airport or designated land crossings. Most irregular border crossers make a claim for refugee protection (asylum) upon arrival in Canada. Like all other refugee protection claimants, irregular border crossers are referred to the Immigration and Refugee Board's Refugee Protection Division where their claim will be heard and decided (Barrett, 2018, p. 8).

It must also be explicitly stated that "irregular" border crossing does not equate with "illegal" border crossing. According to the United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of

Refugees (Geneva Convention) which came into operation in 1951, and which Canada signed in 1969, asylum seekers always have the right to enter the country in which they wish to apply for refugee status, regardless of how they enter that country (El Refaie, 2001, p. 362). Asylum seekers who cross in between points of entry and set foot on Canadian soil are entitled to the protections that Canadian law entitles every individual, irrespective of legal status. As such, there is no such thing as an "illegal asylum seeker", or "illegal migration", or "border hopper", and it must be observed that the use of these terms are intentional and highly politicized, and they shape political, social, and cultural understandings of individuals exercising their fundamental right to seek asylum.

The temporal period of this essay reflects one month of media coverage on the acute surge of vulnerable populations fleeing the US between 2016-2018, specifically focusing on the height of this period in August 2017 (see Table 1). The vast majority of this migration movement was concentrated at the New York-Quebec border, and many of those (greater than one third) seeking asylum were of Haitian origin (Barrett, 2018, p.11). The increase of asylum seekers within this period was motivated in part by the fear that these populations would lose their Temporary Protected Status (TPS) in the US under the Trump administration. For Haitian nationals living within the US, TPS was granted following the devastating 2010 earthquake (Barrett, 2018, p. 11). Due to both the existing deficiencies of the US asylum system and the anti-migrant changes under the Trump administration, these populations recognized their poor chance of receiving asylum in the US. This reality, combined with the well-documented spread of (mis)information amongst immigrant communities in the US regarding the "generous" nature of the Canadian asylum system- heightened by the media coverage of Syrian refugees- pushed many across the border during the summer of 2017. Between July and September 2017, the

Royal Canadian Mounted Police intercepted approximately 11,000 irregular border crossers, including several thousand Haitians (Barrett, 2018, p.88). A number of temporary shelters were set up at this time, including the well-publicized use of Montreal's Olympic Stadium.

Table 1. Asylum seekers apprehended between ports of entry by the RCMP, 2017.
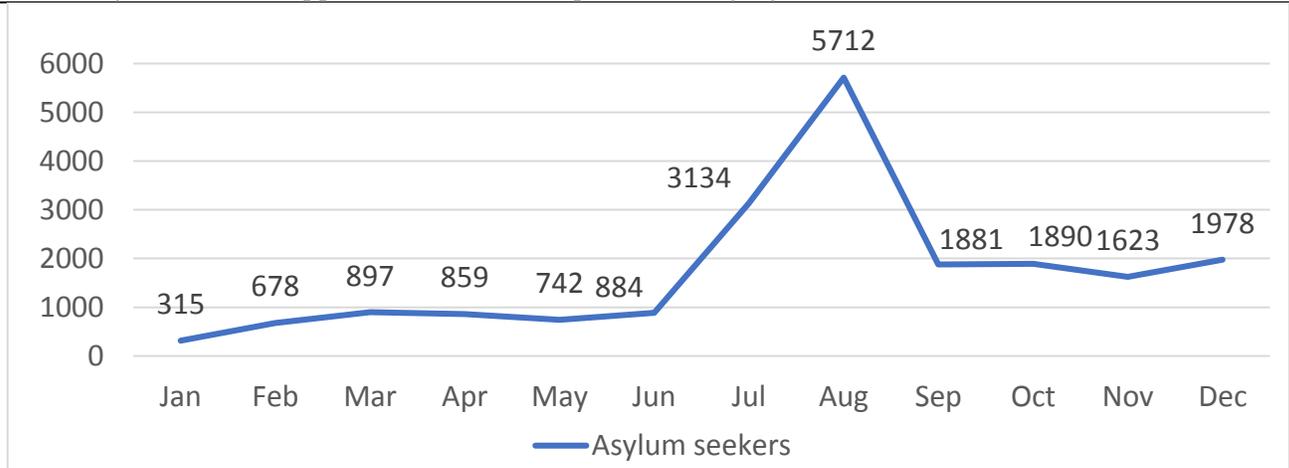
Data was taken from UNHCR Canada, April 2018, "Irregular Crossings at The Border".

The border crossing of asylum seekers between the US and Canada is governed by the bilateral Canada-US Safe Third Country Agreement (STCA), which has been in effect since December 2004 (Arbel & Brenner, 2013). While the terms of the STCA bar claims of asylum at official land ports of entry between the US and Canada (deeming both countries "safe"), the law allows claims to be made if asylum seekers cross unauthorized, between official ports of entry. This is a "legal loophole" that is actually within the STCA itself, and incentivizes unauthorized, unregulated, and dangerous border crossings. Thus, the rise of Haitian asylum seekers during the summer of 2017 at irregular border crossings was necessitated under the STCA (Barrett, 2018, p.13). In short, the STCA leaves asylum seekers more vulnerable to border violence and exploitation while attempting to flee the deficient Trump administration, and blocks and deters them from asserting their right to asylum in Canada through official ports of entry, as guaranteed

under international law. Following their entry of Canada at irregular entry points, asylum seekers

are intercepted by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police and Canada Border Services Agency

(CBSA). At this point, individuals seeking refugee protection may make their claim and begin

the application process from within Canada. Again, there is nothing "illegal" about this process,

though the need for asylum seekers to cross irregularly into Canada from the US- a dangerous

and stigmatized process- in order to exercise their international right to seek asylum within

Canada must continue to be challenged.

Case Study

Methodology

Canadian national media within this period was particularly interested in the rise of irregular

migration into Canada, especially throughout August 2017. For the purpose of a project of a

manageable size, this essay limits this data to the English-speaking national newspapers of *The*

Globe and Mail and *National Post.* Through a comprehensive search of the online archive of

these two newspapers for the period of August 1st-September 1st 2017, using the keywords

"asylum seeker", "refugee", "migrant", and "border", 35 articles were found and analyzed that

directly relate to in-land asylum seekers entering Canada from the US. My process for analyzing

the texts was as follows: I analyzed the articles by carefully reading each text, I then reflected on

what I read, and then I would write notes and develop tables that summarized the themes that

emerged in relation to one another (Rozanova, 2010, p. 216). In this way, I analyzed the 35

articles using tools of thematic analysis, and related the themes I uncovered to the broader social

context in which the articles were produced. This was done to produce insights into why

journalists might describe migration-related issues in particular ways, and the larger implications

of this rhetoric.

Evidently, the specific findings of this research are valid only within the context of *The Globe and Mail* and *National Post* from August 1st-September 1st, 2017, but the themes uncovered are reflective of other studies on migration in textual media (Abid, Manan, & Rahman, 2017; Cartner, 2009; Diop, 2014; Gabrielatos & Baker, 2008). My theoretical framework was the belief that these themes are embedded in social actions and power relations that shape what is and what is not newsworthy, and can provide guidelines for how people think and speak about migration in the context of a national discourse within the summer of 2017. This discourse is not only limited to abstract conversations, but shapes the practical and human rights implications of refugee policy and law, thus having profound effects over the lives of those exercising their right to seek asylum within Canada.

Findings

As I analyzed the articles, two discursive themes immediately emerged as the most common: 1) descriptions of the *quantity* of asylum seekers through water metaphors; and 2) the *illegalization* of the asylum seekers. I will argue in my final section that both of these themes reflect a national anxiety over the Canada/US border, and point to larger questions over the nature of Canadian "tolerance".

1. Quantity

Of the 35 articles studied, every one of them noted the quantity of asylum seekers crossing the border into Canada. This often extended beyond just descriptions of the exact number of asylum seekers for the summer of 2017 (ie "more than 7000 people have illegally entered Canada since June", or "Since July 1, nearly 6800 people have streamed across the border"), but focused on emotive and highly descriptive terms to describe the quantity of migrants and the "burden" they were putting on Canadian financial resources. These included such phrases as: "an exodus of

Haitian migrants", "many predicated the numbers would explode", "the number has since surged", "asylum seekers flock to Quebec", and "the crush of asylum seekers".

From here, descriptions of a migration "crisis" or "fiasco" would often emerge. For example, a *Globe and Mail* article published on August 10th, 2017, titled "As asylum seekers flock to Quebec, Canadian agencies pitch in" included the following sentence: "But they [Canadian Armed Forces] present a fresh symbol of how a recent wave of border-crossers have taxed the Canadian border and immigration systems in Quebec" (Perreaux, 2017). Moreover, a *National Post* article from August 17th, titled "Number of asylum seekers at Quebec border nearly quadrupled in July, figures show", stated that, "Patrick Lefort of the Canada Border Services Agency says additional resources are being deployed to deal with the crush" ("Number of asylum seekers", 2017). On September 1st, 2017 the *National Post* also published an article titled, "Heated trailers and border outreach: Liberals look to prevent winter migrant crisis", stating that, in reference to the rise of Haitian asylum seekers, "the federal government is trying to pre-empt another such crisis flaring up in winter" (Smith, 2017b).

Within this discursive framing of a "crisis", the most common way that this process of evoking fear over the numbers of asylum seekers was through the metaphorical framing of migrants as 'water' (El Refaie, 2001; Gabrielatos & Baker, 2008; Khosravinik, 2009). For example, of the 25 *Globe and Mail* articles studied, 55% of the articles used the descriptive word "surge" to describe the increased numbers of migrants crossing the border. Moreover, 25% of these articles used the word "wave" and/or "flow" to describe the quantity of migrants crossing the border, 15% used "stream in", 10% used "trickle in", "flood in", "pour into", or "swell", and 5% used "plug". The *National Post* also used these words as well, though to a lesser extent than *The Globe and Mail*. While the *National Post* articles did not use the words "wave", "plug", or

"swell", they did use "surge", "flow", "trickle", "stream", "flood", and "pour". The full summary

of this data can be found in Table 2.

Table 2. [1]			
	The Globe and Mail (20)	*National Post (15)*	*Total (35)*
"wave"	5		5
"flow"/ "stem the flow"/ "inflow"	5	3	8
"trickle"/ "trickling"	2	1	3
"stream in"/ "streamed across"	3	2	5
"surge"/ "surging"	11	3	14
"flood"/ "flooding"	2	2	4
"pour into"/ "poured across"	2	1	3
"plug"	1		1
"swell"	2		2

The water theme can be expressed through tokens in three major word-classes: as a noun

("wave"), as a compound noun ("waves of migrants"), and as a verb ("trickle in"). According to

Goatly, the word class of the vehicle term has an important influence on the way in which a

metaphor is interpreted (Goatly, 1997). For example, the following sentence from a *Globe and*

Mail article from August 23rd, titled "Immigration Minister denies that Canada was unprepared

for surge of asylum seekers", provides a helpful example in how different word-classes can be

used to describe migration:

> Canada's Immigration Minister denies his government was poorly prepared for the surge
> of asylum seekers streaming on foot into Quebec from the United States this summer,

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[1] Some notes on Table 2: The data here is representative of when the word is used by the journalist in their own words, not as a direct quote of someone else. Further, I counted each word only once for each article, but many repeated the same words multiple times in the article. For example, a *Globe and Mail* article published on August 7th titled "What you need to know about the Quebec asylum seekers" used the word "wave" twice and "surge" six times but was included in Table 2 only once. Finally, I took into account the context of the word (ie. the words around it), and I only counted the word if it had its own meaning and was referring to the quantity of the migrants in Canada, ie I did not count "stream" if it was in the word "streamlined" or "flow" for "overflowed the courtroom". The words also needed to refer to Canada: I did not count the word "illegal" if it was referring to migrants within the US.

> even as federal officials intensify efforts to try to curb the flow of those showing up at irregular border crossings (Peritz, 2017).

Here, the compound noun "surge of asylum seekers" is able to evoke the immediate image of flowing water. The verb "streaming" requires a process of 'vehicle construction' in which the reader must first imagine water as a subject colligate of "streaming" then compare the movement and characteristics of refugees with that of water (El Refaie, 2001, p.360). This process also occurs with the phrase "curb the flow". These constructions thus invite the reader to infer that the refugees are to be imagined as possessing characteristics of water. Because 'vehicle construction' requires time and effort, "people are more likely to process those metaphor tokens which are in the form of verbs… automatically and unconsciously, without realizing their underlying implications" (El Refaie, 2001, p.360). Moreover, the ability of these literary trends to evoke rich imagery is not just linked to word class but to conventionality. Both the terms "flow" (in 8 articles) and "surge" (in 14 articles) appeared so regularly in the articles studied, and often repeated many times per article, that they are unlikely to strike most readers as unusual.

Interestingly, the use of metaphor in migration discourse seems to have a transnational character, transgressing territorial and linguistic boundaries (Van der Valk, 2003, p. 331). According to der Valk, "the water metaphor symbolizes a loss of control over immigration. Too many immigrants enter the country. We lost control over the process" (Van der Valk, 331). This sense of "losing control" over the number of asylum seekers entering Canada in August 2017 was pervasive in all of the texts, and likening these individuals to a "crisis" or to a surge of water (a natural disaster) was the most common way that this was discursively enacted.

2. *Illegalization*

In addition to the water theme, there was a frequent distribution of expressions within the articles that indicated a blatant negative bias towards in-land asylum seekers generally, and those

individuals that cross the border irregularly specifically. The most common way that this was

done was through the loaded terms "illegal" or "illegality" to describe the group of asylum

seekers and their movement across the border, as demonstrated in Table 3. These terms were

used in 20/35 (57%) of the total articles studied, and in every case, the criminalization of asylum

seekers was done without context for the need and legal justification (as per the aforementioned

STCA) of irregular crossing into Canada. For example, a *National Post* article from August 24th

was titled, "Liberals facing calls for longer-term solution to illegal migration from U.S.", and a

Globe and Mail article from August 31st was titled, "Cornwall, Ont. Venue to stop housing

migrants as illegal border crossings drop" (Smith, 2017a; Zilio, 2017). Moreover, the perception

of "illegality" can be transferred from a particular action ("illegal migration") onto the people

thought to be performing the activity ("illegal migrants"). For example, an article from

September 1st 2017 by *National Post* stated the following: "A tent city erected in Cornwall, Ont.

was never used, and that city's conference centre is emptying of its temporary residents as the

flow of illegal migrants into Canada ebbs" (Smith, 2017b). In this way, when "illegal" is

employed as a noun, as in "illegal migrant", the identity of the asylum seekers is utterly reduced

to their supposedly illegal activity, and the use of this rhetoric carries significant social, cultural,

and political weight (El Refaie, 364). The next and final section argues that these discursive

trends can be understood to symbolize the issue of how to police the Canada/US border, both in a

literal sense and in a more abstract sense of borders of identity.

Table 3.			
	The Globe and Mail (20)	*National Post (15)*	*Total (35)*
"illegal"/ "illegally"	10	10	20

Analysis

One way to understand this data is through the assertion that the naturalization process of "crisis" and water metaphors, as well as the various uses of the term "illegal" to describe asylum seekers in August 2017, showcases the way that migrants who arrive on Canadian soil are often perceived as a homogenous threat to Canadian sovereignty. While Conventional refugees are often referred for resettlement from abroad through the UNHCR (an intense process that often takes years to complete), asylum seekers crossing through the Canada/US border have already arrived on Canadian soil when they make their claim for resettlement. Herein lies they key to understanding how, and to what end, nationalist discursive processes towards asylum seekers are often rooted in anxiety over territoriality and the ways that this fear translates into print media rhetoric.

Without going too much into the theory of securitization, security (broadly conceived) describes "discursive associations between sub-categories of migrants as dangerous, deceitful, or otherwise threatening, all for the purpose of rationalizing economically beneficial social and territorial exclusion" (Atak et al., 2018, pp. 5–6). Within the example of Haitian asylum seekers described above, rhetoric is employed that frames these individuals as illegal and a threat to the integrity of the border. By highlighting certain aspects of migration (i.e. the "burden" of resources, or the irregular mode of entry) and not addressing others (i.e. the vulnerability of these communities under Trump's administration), print media is presenting the Canadian public with some carefully chosen facts about migration, and also a sense of how to interpret that information (Atak et al., 2018, p. 6). In short, asylum seekers are understood and represented as criminals whose border transgressions offend deeply held beliefs about border control as the instantiation of sovereignty. Thus, these communities become excluded from commonly held

assumptions of Canadian "tolerance" and "goodwill" towards migrants: they are undeserving recipients of Canadian generosity by virtue of their mode of entry into this country.

This argument is reinforced when you look at recent trends in Canada's response to asylum seekers, specifically the arrival of nearly 600 Tamil migrants in 2009 and 2010, which sparked an increase of public conversations regarding in-land asylum seekers and was the foundation upon which increased restrictive refugee reforms were implemented. Immediately following the arrival of the second boat, *MV Sun Sea*, the Government stated that at least one-third of the passengers aboard were "suspected human smugglers and terrorists" working to reconstitute the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE)'s "base of operations overseas in order to renew resistance to the Government of Sri Lanka" (Atak et al., 2018, p. 6). As such, the linkages between irregular migration and security were the pretext to deploy restrictive immigration measures. In 2013, the Auditor General of Canada noted that the,

> Canadian government considers migrant smuggling as a profit-driven organized crime that exploits vulnerable people, funds terrorist activities, undermines the integrity of Canada's borders and immigration system, and threatens the national security of Canada and its partners (Atak et al., 2018, p. 7).

An analysis of this statement reveals a number of goals, including the reinforcement of state sovereignty and the maintenance of a border regime that is open to those that play by the rules (Atak et al., 2018, p. 7). Asylum seekers that arrive on Canadian soil- including those Tamil migrants that arrived by boat and those Haitian migrants that walk over the border in Quebec- are not considered to respect the "integrity of Canada's borders and immigration system". As such, they are treated by the government and by the media as threats: as water seeping through a permeable wall, and as criminals strategically and systematically undermining the legal system. Again, this has profound practical and human rights implications for those exercising their right to claim asylum within Canada.

Conclusion

As mentioned above, the discursive process of framing asylum seekers as a threat to Canadian sovereignty is done in both a literal sense (as literal border crossers) as well as in a more abstract sense of borders of identity (as criminals, as malicious opportunists). This process is cognizant with the way that some scholars have theorized borders and national identity, and how "borders determine the nature of group (in some cases defined territorially) belonging, affiliation and membership, and the way in which the process of inclusion and exclusion are institutionalized" (Newman, 2006, p. 147). Through the discursive framing of asylum seekers as threats (in the media but also by government organizations, political parties, and state legislation), national identity constructs are produced within spaces where sovereign power defines members and nonmembers: who is worthy of Canadian "goodwill", and inherently, who is not. This construction necessitates ongoing conversations on the very nature and purpose of these categories, the limits of "tolerance" within migration policy, and the need for a justice-based approach to migration that relies less on arbitrary notions of Canadian "generosity", and more on the fundamental obligation to provide refuge to those seeking asylum on Canadian shores.

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