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## U.S.–MEXICO RELATIONS IN THE TRUMP ERA AND BEYOND

### Racial Capitalism Rearticulated

*Diana Graizbord*

#### Introduction<sup>1</sup>

On June 16, 2015, Donald Trump announced he was running for president of the United States during a rally held at Trump Tower in New York City. Just moments into the speech he turned to the topic of Mexico. Trump began,

When do we beat Mexico at the border? They're laughing at us, at our stupidity. And now they are beating us economically. They are not our friend, believe me. But they're killing us economically.

At first, it seemed Trump was gearing up to address his plan to repeal the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). Though initially quite controversial, the trade agreement had seemed to recede from national public debate for decades, but in the lead-up to the 2016 election it was back on the agenda for candidates across the ideological spectrum.<sup>2</sup> However, on this afternoon in 2015, Trump quickly shifted focus to another policy domain that has long defined the relationship between the U.S. and Mexico: immigration. He continued,

When Mexico sends its people, they're not sending their best. They're not sending you . . . They're sending people that have lots of problems, and they're bringing those problems with us [sic]. They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists. And some, I assume, are good people.

*(The Washington Post, 2015)*

With this, Trump made strikingly clear that for him the *real* threat at the southern border was not a strong Mexican economy, Mexican corporate competitors, or even its economic policymakers, but a criminalized, would-be Mexican migrant.

Critics balked at this characterization. How could a candidate inaugurate his presidential campaign by calling Mexicans *rapists*? “Mexico is our *friend!*,” “*neighbor*,” “*ally*,” and “*biggest trade partner*” cried Democrats and Republicans alike. At first glance, Trump’s posture vis-à-vis Mexico suggests a stark departure from previous administrations. Trump was quick to denounce Mexico as an economic enemy, demonize Mexican migrants as criminal threats, and promote discriminatory and even violent policy against Mexicans in the U.S. For these reasons, it is tempting to suggest, as some critics do, that Trump has inaugurated an altogether new era in U.S. foreign policy and a dramatic shift in U.S.–Mexico relations in particular. I argue instead that the Trump administration’s position toward Mexico represents a great degree of continuity with previous eras and administrations.

As scholars of racial capitalism argue, global relations are defined by iterative though not always predictable entanglements between economic and racial discourses and policies. (See Christian, 2018 for a thorough review). As I will show below, the contemporary relationship between the U.S. and Mexico is best understood as an instantiation of neoliberal racial capitalism. By this I mean that at least since the 1980s and certainly since the passage of NAFTA in 1993, the relationship between the two countries has been structured by a neoliberal economic project consisting of deregulation, incentives for capital mobility, and reduced barriers to trade, *and* a series of racial projects deployed to manage the fact that for U.S. capital Mexican labor is “wanted, but unwelcome” (Zolberg, 2006).

From this perspective, Trump’s problematization of Mexico and the twin policy domains—trade and immigration—around which the relationship between the U.S. and Mexico is structured fit within a long-practiced political balancing act. This balancing act is, in turn, a result of the complementary yet at times contradictory nature of the racial and economic projects that underlie U.S. empire and statecraft. Consider briefly how the two administrations that preceded Trump’s dealt with trade and immigration. Both President Obama and President Bush cultivated strong economic ties, promoted capital interests, and strengthened trade with Mexico. At the same time, neither Obama nor Bush presented a particularly pro-immigrant stance or policy proposal. Beyond politically opportunistic appeals and piecemeal policies directed at “desirable” immigrant communities, for example, by granting temporary relief from deportation or extending worker visas, both administrations violently managed “undesirable” segments by criminalizing migrants, militarizing the border, and deporting undocumented immigrants *en masse*.<sup>3</sup>

Despite various threats and tough anti-trade talk Trump’s record shows he has not been any less committed than his predecessors to protecting NAFTA and the cross-border neoliberal project it represents. On immigration, Trump has appeared to move away from his immediate predecessors’ discursive embrace of Mexicans and other immigrant communities, finding

it politically expedient to deploy patently racist language and policy instead. But even this move is not wholly unprecedented. As I will show below, the Trump administration's repertoire of racist and violent rhetoric and the policy proposals this seems to justify, is assembled from a set of available and resonant policy discourses and practices that have long formed part of how U.S. political elites manage the complex and unequal relationship with Mexico. Rather than inaugurating a new era, the Trump administration has simply given greater valance to an already existing racist logic than his recent predecessors, who were notably more skilled at discursively obfuscating how race underpins neoliberal capitalism.

### Neoliberal Rearticulations of Racial Capitalism

Scholars of racial projects have argued that racialization and racism are not anomalies or irregularities but constitutive elements of state formation, nation building, social and economic policy (Zolberg, 2006; Omi and Winant, 2015), and indeed organizing principles of society and modernity (DuBois, 2018 [1903]). Examining the relationship between race and economic policies has led scholars to argue that while economic and racial projects may seem relatively autonomous these are always deeply entangled (e.g. Omi and Winant, 2015; Christian, 2018). Global racialized structures undergird global capitalist relations, be they colonial, industrial and developmental, or neoliberal. Racialized structures and ideology also undergird the contradictions of capitalism including dispossession, exploitation, alienation, and inequality (Clarno, 2017).

Taken together, these insights echo W.E.B. DuBois' assertion that racism and racialization are "structuring elements of historical capitalism" (Itzigsohn and Brown, 2020).<sup>4</sup> From a DuBoisian perspective, global capital interests are promoted by a global capitalist class that operates not only to preserve and promote class interests but also to preserve and promote a global racial order. As Itzigsohn and Brown (2020) argue, for DuBois, "political configurations between class and racial groups" maintained the global racial order, the institutions on which the order rested, and the resulting forms of global difference and inequality. This becomes particularly salient when we consider the global organization of labor. Racialized geographies and bodies representing different positions within the global division of labor are organized by "the color line that belts the world" (DuBois, 2018 [1903]).

Recent research has demonstrated that the deep entanglements between economic and racial projects extend into the neoliberal era (e.g. Richards, 2013; Clarno, 2017; Christian, 2018). But, as Clarno argues (following Stuart Hall), rather than assuming that we inherit a "constant or stable relationship between race and class," we should understand the relationship as a "complex unity," constituted by contingent, not always predictable "articulations"

of neoliberal racial and economic projects (2017, p. 10). Racial and economic discourses and policy practices become interlocked in sometimes unlikely or contradictory assemblages. As states pursue neoliberal economic policies, they may make appeals to racial discourses and/or promote racist or anti-racist policies to promote or manage economic pursuits. For example, in the case of Chile, Richards (2013) shows how as the state implemented “free-market” neoliberal reforms, political elites made appeals to inclusion, multiculturalism, and indigeneity, even as the state pursued policies that further disenfranchised and marginalized indigenous populations through land appropriation and violence. Clarno (2017) shows that in South Africa and Palestine/Israel, neoliberal restructuring has also resulted in dispossession, marginalization, and displacement of people of color. These effects have been productively recast as issues affecting the “security” of white populations. The trope of securitization, in turn, is deployed to justify violent policing and increased criminalization of brown and Black bodies. Dealing specifically with the relationship between capital mobility and racialized labor, Narayan (2017, p. 2454) argues that the tensions and contradictions of the contemporary racialized global division of labor continue to be cast, as in colonial settings, in terms of “protection” for white citizens deserving of “justice” against the threat of a racialized other. Through these very different cases, we can begin to see not only how supposedly race-neutral economic policies are racialized, but also how the state pursues and promotes other, often racist projects in order to manage the effects of economic pursuits.

From this perspective, we might consider the relationship between the U.S. and Mexico a historically situated instantiation of racial capitalism that has been successively rearticulated in different moments under different administrations. To be sure, under previous administrations, a “hard racial framing” (Wingfield and Feagin, 2012) of Mexico and Mexicans that relies on “explicit racist imagery and language [and] openly contextualizes people of color as racially inferior to whites” (p. 145) may have seemed to recede from national politics. What has remained constant is a perennial tension between the “imperatives of capital” and “identitarian nativism” as well as the master trope of “desirability/undesirability” as a way to categorize immigrants and organize immigration policy (Zolberg, 2006). A defining feature of the U.S. policy approach to Mexico, moreover, has been an unwillingness to confront the fact that economic policy is structured by race. Trade agreements such as NAFTA are premised on the pursuit of “capital mobility” and “deregulation” *and* undergirded by a deeply entrenched global racial order.

Before turning to how the Trump administration has rearticulated, but not fundamentally changed, the relationship between economic and racial projects that characterize U.S.–Mexico relations, I return to the period when NAFTA was first negotiated. I offer an admittedly abbreviated history of how trade and immigration

debates unfolded to emphasize that by the time Trump took office, his go-to tropes and policy proposals had been circulating, to various effects, for decades.

### ***The Repertoire: Capital Mobility, Criminality, and The Wall(s)***

NAFTA was drafted in 1992 by President George H.W. Bush and his Mexican and Canadian counterparts. The agreement was subsequently ratified by the legislatures of the three countries in 1993 and signed into law in 1994 by Presidents Bill Clinton and Carlos Salinas de Gortari and Canadian Prime Minister Brian Mulroney. NAFTA gave signatory countries “most favored nation” status and its proponents promised mutually beneficial “economic integration,” greater “competitiveness” and the “free” cross-border movements of certain goods and services—though notably not people. NAFTA had several major provisions, including the immediate elimination of tariffs on Mexican and U.S. imports and exports. While some agricultural products were excluded from this provision, tariffs were subsequently phased out, and NAFTA also included elimination of non-tariff barriers aimed to incentivize trade and cross-border investment. For these reasons, NAFTA is often treated as an exemplar of neoliberalism and a model for other regional “free-market” trade agreements.

While the “free flow” of capital, goods, and services was being promoted as the “greatest economic opportunity” for the U.S. and its neighbors by the political establishment (Krugman, 1993; Orme, 1993; Johnson, 1994), not everyone agreed. The strongest opposition to the trade agreement in the U.S. came from organized labor.<sup>5</sup> Labor activists argued that NAFTA would incentivize U.S.-based companies to move their operations to Mexico taking “American jobs” with them, while the jobs that remained would have to compete with lower paid Mexican labor. These substantive concerns were amplified and distorted as they were incorporated into more hostile, anti-Mexican rhetoric most famously, though not exclusively, by third-party candidate, Ross Perot. In his nativist reframing of what were legitimate concerns voiced by labor activists, Mexico appeared as a giant monster “sucking” away at the U.S. economy and the livelihoods of U.S. workers.<sup>6</sup> This reframing of anti-NAFTA sentiment shifted focus away from U.S.-based companies and the responsibilities of U.S. capital, to new adversaries. As Johnson argues, “anti-NAFTA arguments almost exclusively focused on the characteristics of Mexico and its citizens” (Johnson, 1993, p. 954). But rather than a focus on Mexican labor in terms that might align with the interests of U.S. labor, Mexicans were framed as “undeserving” (Zolberg, 2006). Mexican workers *cum* migrants were seen as threats rather than potential allies.

Despite the connection between trade policy and labor migration, the latter was conspicuously absent from debates about NAFTA. U.S. trade negotiators deliberately “excluded the subject of labor migration from the bargaining table” (Johnson, 1993, p. 940) despite the obvious and always present linkages between

the two issues.<sup>7</sup> As Johnson argues, the U.S. negotiators found it “politically expedient, if not essential, to separate the interrelated issues of trade and labor flow” (p. 941). In other words, the political establishment opted to defend cross-border trade and promote its potential economic benefits while purposely ignoring its links to migration and displacement. The decoupling of immigration and neoliberal trade was effective in helping policymakers avert debate about how NAFTA would further marginalize the working class in the U.S. *and* displace the rural sector in Mexico. Moreover, this protected trade talks from criticism regarding the racist logic underlying uneven economic globalization. Indeed, anti-NAFTA arguments were framed as “xenophobic” and racially motivated (Krugman, 1993; Orme, 1993), while the fact that NAFTA itself was built upon the already established global racialized division of labor was ignored. The decoupling of trade and migration had long-term policy effects. Unlike certain environmental and labor regulations which were directly negotiated alongside NAFTA, each of the three signatory countries retained the right to make their own immigration policy.

NAFTA’s emphasis on “capital mobility” and opportunities for capital investment did not, of course, result in labor immobility (Fernández-Kelly and Massey 2007; Otero 2018). As many had predicted, following NAFTA migration increased as much of the peasantry was bankrupted (Otero, 2018). In this context, as Massey et al. (2002) argue, the cultivation of public excitement over “free trade,” coevolved with the “cultivation of public hysteria about undocumented migration” (p. 88). Right-wing and anti-immigration activists began talking about the border as “out of control” (Ackerman, 2011). This narrative was, in turn, picked up by policymakers who talked of a growing “crisis” at the U.S.–Mexico border and framed “uncontrolled migration” as the greatest threat facing U.S. security (Andreas, 1998). Republican politicians, in particular, began proclaiming that the U.S. needed protection against a “perceived invasion of ‘undesirables’” (Andreas, 1998, p. 591). As Zolberg (2006) shows, the language of “undesirability” that circulated so effectively in the 1990s, was nothing new. Indeed, the distinction between “desirable” and “undesirable” immigrants has always been central to U.S. nation building and a defining feature of U.S. immigration policy. At least since the 1960s, Mexican immigrants have been singularly and consistently targeted as undesirable threats (Zolberg, 2006). In the 1990s, the rhetorical power of these narratives was heightened by the fact that migration was finally and firmly linked to illegality (Ackerman, 2013).<sup>8</sup>

As U.S. policymakers seized the opportunity to remake immigration and border policy, narratives of crisis and criminality helped justify the militarization of the border (Ackerman, 2011). Border “security” became an increasingly important focus of both Republican and Democratic politicians and lawmakers as migration from Mexico increased. Though Bill Clinton did not begin his first term on a specifically anti-immigration platform, soon after taking office in 1993 he and other Democrats became enthusiastic supporters of various plans to manage the so-called crisis and secure the border. In July 1993, for example,

Clinton asked (a majority Democratic) Congress for \$172.5 million to cover the first phase of a multiyear plan “to protect our borders, remove criminal aliens, reduce work incentives for illegal immigration, stop asylum abuse, reinvent and revitalize INS, and encourage legal immigrants to become naturalized citizens” (Bill Clinton quoted in Zolberg 2006, p. 400).

During the Clinton years, the Immigration and Naturalization Services (INS) became the fastest growing federal agency and though the border had arguably been militarized decades before (Andreas, 1998), the years that immediately surrounded the passage of NAFTA marked the border’s “hyper-militarization” (Palafox, 2000). Clinton’s multiyear plan was inaugurated with the launch of Operation Hold the Line which entailed a Border Patrol blockade around El Paso and a 1.5-mile steel fence along the border. Joining Operation Hold the Line were subsequent operations including Gatekeeper, a measure implemented in 1994, that was specifically promoted as a “prevention through deterrence” mission. These operations were characterized by the beefing-up of the Border Patrol, massive deployment of law enforcement agents and military personnel, and the use of military language, surveillance technologies, military communication equipment and border control technology (Andreas, 1998).

Though Massey et al. (2002) argue that border militarization strategies were enacted mostly for symbolic political purposes and were generated by the particular interactions between economic insecurities and a racialized public hysteria, these histrionics resulted in material changes along the border. Another major feature of border Operations was the construction of border walls and fencing. Joining the wall along the El Paso area, subsequent border walls included, for example, a 10-foot high steel wall in the San Diego area, a 15-foot tall and 5-mile long fence in Nogales and a similar one in New Mexico.<sup>9</sup> As Andreas (1998) argues, fortifying border crossing points became a non-partisan issue,

as the border became the primary stage on which the government’s moral resolve to combat illegal immigration would be tested, politicians from across the political spectrum scrambled to outdo one another in proposing tougher measures . . . fortifying the most visible and popular urban entry points for illegal migrants.

*(p. 13)*

Note the increased salience of the border and its walls as a hyper-visible stage for political performances and state violence.

### **Racial Capitalism Rearticulated: Trade and Immigration under Trump**

When Trump entered the political scene, he was quick to take up immigration and trade with Mexico as campaign issues. As I will show below, in doing so

Trump rehashed a repertoire made available years before. In the remainder of this chapter, I first look at how the Trump administration has handled NAFTA and then immigration *cum* border security policy. By treating these policy domains separately, I do not mean to suggest that they are unconnected, but rather I do so to emphasize how politically productive and lasting the decoupling of these domains has been. In each section, I examine how the policy problem is framed and understood and consider both enacted policies as well as the partial or promised proposals the Trump administration has put forth. Since policy is always partial and subject to contestation and reformulation, examining partial and unfinished policy can help illuminate pressure points, contestation, and moments of resistance (Shore et al., 2011).

### ***From Terminating NAFTA to NAFTA 2.0***

During his campaign, Trump’s position on NAFTA vacillated between threats to terminate and repeal what he often referred to as “the single worst trade deal ever approved” and promises to renegotiate its terms. For example, at a campaign rally in Grand Rapids Michigan in November of 2016, just days before the election Trump promised the following:

A Trump administration will renegotiate NAFTA and if we don’t get the deal we want, we will terminate NAFTA and get a much better deal for our workers and our companies.

*(Bennett and Quist-Arcton, 2017)*

In his promises to repeal and renegotiate NAFTA, the trade agreement was framed as harmful for U.S. workers and U.S. capital. On the campaign trail in particular, Trump often blamed job loss on the trade agreement. Trump’s focus on the threat NAFTA posed to U.S. workers harked back to anti-NAFTA opposition mobilized decades ago. But, whereas in the 1990s public anti-NAFTA sentiment was mostly focused on Mexico, Trump split his focus between calling out Mexico as an economic enemy and blaming U.S. “elite” and “globalist” politicians for their bad deal-making and a disregard for U.S. workers. Through this populist reframing Trump claimed NAFTA was a “disaster” for U.S. workers, without specifying why exactly that was the case. Trump’s anti-NAFTA position was not accompanied by specific policy proposals. Instead, his problematization of the trade deal benefited from a vague emphasis on the incommensurability between “globalist” and American interests as a way to harness public anger among the white working class and garner support for his campaign.

By focusing on how NAFTA harmed labor *and* capital, Trump elevated NAFTA to the center of a broader nativist and protectionist campaign promise to “put America first.” As Pacewicz (2016) argues, Trump’s success was in part explained by his ability to capitalize on “undirected populist resentment at a

technocratic, corporate-friendly elite.” While this is certainly so, Trump’s version of populism was anchored and amplified by racism and racial anxiety. As Bhambra (2017) argues, mobilizing white working class rhetoric and identity politics was effective in so far as it built on a preexisting deeply racialized economic order (see also Narayan, 2017; Sides et al., 2018).

When Trump took office, he continued to threaten to repeal NAFTA, despite slow but ongoing negotiations to preserve it. If he ever really meant to repeal NAFTA, by fall of 2018, Trump seemed to have caved in to pressure from pro-trade lobbyists, Republican members of Congress, governors from export-dependent states, and from economic analysts who feared “market backlash” (Alden 2018). In November of 2018, after nearly a year of backstage negotiations by staffers, Trump met with Mexico’s President Enrique Peña Nieto and Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau at the G20 summit meeting to discuss the terms of the NAFTA renegotiation. Shortly after the meeting in Buenos Aires, Trump tweeted that he had, *[j]ust signed one of the most important, and largest, Trade Deals in U.S. and World History. And that, [t]he terrible NAFTA will soon be gone. The USMCA will be fantastic for all!*

A closer look at the terms of the United States–Mexico–Canada (USMCA) agreement tells a different story. Despite talk of repealing and replacing NAFTA, USMCA is perhaps better understood, as many have noted, as a kind of NAFTA 2.0. The USMCA upholds much of the original agreement including key neo-liberal sticking points such as the continental free-trade zone, and investment and capital flow provisions. Rather than replacing NAFTA, USMCA in many ways strengthened the original trade agreement by making it better able to meet the new needs of capital including issues of intellectual property with new digital economy provisions. This does not mean that nothing was offered to U.S. and Mexico-based workers, or that the agreement is exactly like its predecessor. For example, under USMCA the requirements for in-country production were raised from 63% to 75% and the agreement stipulates that workers making 16 dollars an hour or more must provide 40% (rather than the original 30%) of the labor that goes into building a car. USMCA also imposes stricter labor requirements, which may make it easier for workers in Mexico to organize. But despite these changes, there is little in the revised agreement that is likely to reverse deindustrialization or restore so called “American jobs” and the livelihoods that these are imagined as producing. Likewise, the USMCA is unlikely to reverse deruralization and displacement in Mexico that uneven globalization has played a role in producing.

This so-called replacement of NAFTA points to a determined consistency in the U.S. approach to economic relations with Mexico. As Pierson (2017) argues, Trump’s approach suggests a “full-throated endorsement of the GOP economic elite’s long-standing demands” (p. 105) and a continuation of deep hypocrisy which relies on a robust rhetorical populism to mask the fact that in government the interests of capital have typically prevailed. Once again, as we saw in the

1990s, protecting and promoting capital interests on both sides of the border has trumped the interests of labor, while the unequal terms of global trade preserves a racialized global order.

### ***Criminalization and “Common Sense” Solutions***

The determination to maintain a friendly working economic relationship with Mexico has not extended to its twin policy domain: immigration. The June 2015 speech during which Trump announced his candidacy by calling Mexicans rapists set the tone of his campaign and presidency. Despite the criticism he received, Trump’s racist rhetoric and open and violent antagonism toward Mexican and other immigrants continued throughout his campaign and into his presidency. This proved politically effective. Anti-immigrant sentiment was strongly linked to his nomination as the Republican Party candidate as well as to the support he received from white voters in the general election and beyond (Sides et al., 2018).

The centerpiece of Trump’s rhetoric has been the criminalization of Mexican and other brown and Black immigrants. One notable example comes from the second presidential debate, in October 2016, when Trump pledged to secure the border against “drug dealers” and “bad hombres,” language he reportedly repeated during a February 2017 call with President Peña Nieto. During this call, Trump threatened he would send troops to Mexico unless the Mexican government and military did more (Associated Press 2017). Trump is reported as saying,

You have a bunch of bad hombres down there . . . You aren’t doing enough to stop them. I think your military is scared. Our military isn’t, so I just might send them down to take care of it.

Here a universal criminalization of Mexicans served to challenge Mexico’s sovereignty with a threat of military intervention. While the discourse of criminality was not in itself new, Trump’s willingness to break with diplomatic norms by deriding and threatening a sitting president was.

Trump has not only repeatedly singled out Mexicans as criminals but has also used Mexico as a kind of stand-in for a generalized threatening “other.” Consider once again the June 2015 speech. After the initial comments, over cheers Trump continued,

I speak to border guards and they tell us what we’re getting. And it only makes common sense. It only makes common sense. They’re sending us not the right people. It’s coming from more than Mexico. It’s coming from all over South and Latin America, and it’s coming probably—probably—from the Middle East [sic].

*(Phillips, 2017)*

With these words, Trump lumped people from “South and Latin America” and the Middle East into an indistinguishable “it”: an undifferentiated mass of brown bodies pouring over the Mexican border and threatening white U.S. citizens. This imagery of Mexican and other immigrants invading the U.S. from the southern border has been, as Rodríguez-Muñiz (2015) argues a “fixture in U.S. public discourse” since at least the 1980s.

The use of Mexico, and, in particular, the U.S.–Mexico border, as a signifier and shorthand for a greater imminent threat to the (white) United States was especially amplified in the fall of 2018 in the context of the so-called “caravan” of Central American asylum seekers. In October 2018, a group of men, women, and children fleeing increasing political violence and insecurity in their home countries migrated north through Mexico (adding and dropping people along the way), eventually arriving in the northern Mexican city of Tijuana and other border-crossing points in late 2018. Throughout their journey, Trump talked not only of a mounting and imminent crisis but also made wholly fabricated claims about who formed part of the “caravan,” claiming it included members of Mexican drugs cartels, known criminals, and Middle Eastern “terrorists.” Consider an October 2018 news conference held in the Oval Office. Trump was pressed by a journalist on the issue, “Mr. President . . . You had said that there were Middle Easterners in the caravan. Can you explain that? Are you saying there are terrorists?” To this Trump replied, “Well, there could very well be, yeah. There could very well be . . . I have very good information.” During the same interview Vice President Mike Pence fueled this racial anxiety by claiming the caravan was growing in numbers and in the degree of threat it posed the U.S.:

They’ve made their way north . . . they crossed into Guatemala, now crossed into Mexico. There’s some estimates north of 7,000 migrants. So the group is growing. The United States of America intervenes and prevents 10 terrorists—or suspected terrorists—from coming into our country every day. So it’s—it is inconceivable that there would not be individuals from the Middle East as a part of this growing caravan. And what the President’s determined to do is put the safety and security of the American people first.<sup>10</sup>

Trump and other members of his administration repeatedly resorted to the language of “crisis” to describe immigration, despite the now decade-long drop in U.S. immigration.<sup>11</sup> Trump also framed immigrants inaccurately as “illegal aliens,” “stone cold criminals,” and “terrorists” responsible for increasing crime and violence.<sup>12</sup> Again we see Trump reactivating vague yet criminalizing rhetoric.

Trump’s public pronouncements, tweets, and speeches, like the one above, are full of lies and mischaracterizations. But rather than dismissing them for this, we might consider how these work as politically productive assets (McGoey,

2012). That is, cultivating ignorance can be “often more advantageous, both institutionally and personally, than cultivating knowledge” (McGoey, 2012 p. 555). Uncertainty, (*it’s coming probably—probably—from the Middle East*) coupled with fear mongering (*rapists, suspected terrorists*) help to legitimate Trumpian ‘common sense’ (*it only makes common sense. It only makes common sense. They’re sending us not the right people*) as a form of political knowledge. That is, uncertainty helps legitimize lies anchored in racist ideology. As Wingfield and Feagin (2012, p. 145) argue “hard racial framing” involves “emotional, gut-level” responses of racial “disgust, distaste, or discomfort directed toward people of color.” To elicit “gut level” responses and make explicit calls to “common sense” is to call upon a taken for granted, naturalized racial ideology and established racial order as the basis of policy and politics.<sup>13</sup>

While calling on explicitly racist “common sense” is a departure from the color-blind ideology that dominated political discourse in recent years, rather than representing a complete break we might consider how Trump has rearticulated already available policy “solutions.” Racist ideology framed as “common sense” has been particularly effective in underscoring calls for increased security, militarization, and most importantly Trump’s border wall. Readers may recall that during that same June 2015 speech in Trump Tower, then candidate Trump made a promise to build a “great wall”.

As his campaign unfolded, building an ever-taller, longer and more imposing wall, and having Mexico pay for it, became a central rallying cry for Trump supporters. Political theorists have described walls as imagined geographies and as screens for projected desires, needs, and anxieties (Brown, 2010). Though walls are rather functionally ineffective, they are quite good at containing and projecting political imaginaries. Walls are physical as much as they are discursive and can take many fractal and partial forms. As infrastructures, practices, and discourses, they are entangled with and constitute relationships of power (Brown, 2010). As described above, walls at the U.S.–Mexico border have long served as a theater and screen for racialized anxiety and the performance of political power.

Trump has not succeeded in building a *new* physical wall on the border and the U.S. Congress has not approved funding for a future one. But anti-immigrant militarization and violence both at the border and beyond has been a feature of the Trump presidency. In April, 2018 Attorney General Jeff Sessions asked federal prosecutors to immediately adopt a “zero-tolerance policy” and with this “supersede any existing policies” related to entry into the U.S. Under this, the administration deployed 5,600 troops to the border and called for deploying more (up to 15,000) active-duty military troops to Texas, Arizona, and California.<sup>14</sup> Most notably, the administration initiated a policy of family separation: migrant parents were illegally separated from their children who were held in detention often in abhorrent conditions. Though federal courts put an end to this policy and ordered families be reunited, reunification has been slow and incomplete and the long-term effects on families is likely to be severe.

Under Trump, criminalization and violence against immigrants has not been limited to the border. Trump's rhetoric and policies have helped distribute border security policy and moved the wall inward, in a perhaps unprecedented way. One example is the increased presence of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), which can ignore constitutional protections—notably search and seizure—within a hundred-mile radius from the border. As Longo (2018) notes, since this jurisdiction includes coastal regions, ICE has “a jurisdiction so large it includes two-thirds of the U.S. population.” Discriminatory practices by ICE are commonplace, including against citizens, even if the political rhetoric makes it seem as though it only targets so-called “aliens” (Longo, 2018). Moreover, the Southern Poverty Law center, which documents the rise of hate groups and hate crimes, cites 2016 and 2017 as “marked by considerable violence” by white supremacist groups especially “electrified” by Trump, a documented “sympathizer” (Beirich and Buchanan, 2017). Anti-immigrant racist violence, though not unique to the Trump administration, does seem to be uniquely sanctioned.

### **Beyond Trump? The Malleability of Neoliberal Racial Projects**

On, November 24, 2018, as I was sitting down to draft these concluding remarks, the *Washington Post* reported that after months of backstage negotiations the Trump administration had reached an agreement with members of newly elected Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador's cabinet regarding the Central American asylum seekers, who by late November had reached the border city of Tijuana with hopes of entering the United States. According to this report, representatives of the two administrations had agreed on a plan that would effectively remake U.S. immigration and border policy, by requiring asylum seekers to remain in Mexico (a “safe third country”) and not in the U.S., as is the legal requirement, while their claims to asylum were processed through U.S. courts. Two of Trump's many tweets that day seemed to confirm this story. First, Trump tweeted,

Migrants at the Southern Border will not be allowed into the United States until their claims are individually approved in court. We only will allow those who come into our Country legally. Other than that our very strong policy is Catch and Detain. No “Releasing” into the U.S.

And later in the day, a second tweet read,

All will stay in Mexico. If for any reason it becomes necessary, we will CLOSE our Southern Border. There is no way that the United States will, after decades of abuse, put up with this costly and dangerous situation anymore!

*(Trump, 2018a; 2018b)*

By the next morning reports from both U.S. and Mexican media provided a different and conflicting account. Mexico’s incoming Secretary of the Interior, Olga Sánchez, denied engaging in any negotiations with the Trump administration over changing the asylum policy and rejected the notion that Mexico would become a “safe third country.” The press reported that Sánchez and her team had instead called for long-term U.S.–Mexico economic development and an anti-poverty strategy that might prevent migration from Central America and Southern Mexico in the first place. This long-term structural solution echoed a letter President López Obrador had written to Trump shortly after he had won the Mexican presidential election in July.

As I watched this scene unfold, I was heartened not only by the way López Obrador’s team offered a corrective to Trump’s lies, but also by how Sánchez’s proposition contrasted sharply with the approach the U.S. has long taken to issues of immigration. By suggesting the U.S. and Mexico could work together to tackle poverty and inequality underlying migration, Sánchez briefly recoupled economic policy and migration and hinted at what might be the basis of a fundamentally new relationship between the U.S. and Mexico. But by the afternoon of Saturday, November 25, just hours after Sánchez’s statement was made public, border guards began to spray tear gas at a group of Central American migrants including many families with children who had gathered on the Mexico side of a border-crossing point. Blaming Mexico for the incident, Trump immediately ordered the border of San Ysidro between San Diego and Tijuana temporarily closed, tweeting:

Mexico should move the flag waving Migrants, many of whom are stone cold criminals, back to their countries. Do it by plane, do it by bus, do it anyway you want, but they are NOT coming into the U.S.A. We will close the Border permanently if need be. Congress, fund the WALL!

*(Trump, 2018c)*

Far from reconsidering the underlying logic of the U.S.–Mexico relationship, Trump seemed only interested in asserting U.S. power and using the border, once again, as a stage for state violence. I should not have been surprised.

Since the signing of NAFTA in 1994, the relationship between the U.S. and Mexico has been defined by the entanglement between neoliberal economic projects and a racial project directed at managing migration. As I showed above, the Trump administration worked diligently to preserve and promote trade and economic ties with Mexico. At the same time Trump moved away from his immediate predecessors’ discursive embrace of Mexicans and other immigrant communities, by drawing on an available repertoire of racist discourses and policies that have long been deployed within the U.S. As such, rather than inaugurating a new era, the Trump administration has rearticulated the relationship between the U.S. and Mexico, exposing the racial projects that undergird the two countries’ economic ties.

As I write this, Trump is still in office and will perhaps be elected to a second term. Though it is impossible to predict what the post-Trump era will bring, the discussion above provides some hints. In this chapter I have been concerned with historicizing Trump's seemingly unprecedented approach. In tracing how Trump's positions on trade and immigration are linked to the past, I hoped to emphasize not only the durability of (neoliberal) racial capital, but also the political malleability of its constitutive projects. Neoliberalism is shape-shifting and recombinant, racist projects deployed to manage these recombinations may be, like racism itself, always "transforming" (Goldberg, 2009; Christian, 2018). What this suggests is that, while the relationship between the U.S. and Mexico is unlikely to be fundamentally altered in a post-Trump era a new articulation of racial capitalism is likely to emerge.

## Notes

- 1 I would like to thank Marcelo Bohrt, Timothy Gill, Oscar Sosa López, and the participants of the Workshop on Race at the University of Georgia for helpful feedback on earlier drafts.
- 2 Democrats Sherrod Brown, Dennis Kucinich, and Marcy Kaptur among others kept the issue front and center among their constituents. However, it wasn't until the 2016 election that NAFTA once again became a decisive campaign issue across parties: Trump stressed the importance of repealing NAFTA, Bernie Sanders campaigned in part on a plan to change its terms and eventually, even Hillary Clinton began admitting that NAFTA had not lived up to its promises.
- 3 President Obama was famous for his tempered and well researched speeches, for running an inclusive campaign focusing on issues that resonated with Latinx voters, and for making several high level Latinx appointments (Wallace, 2012). During his presidency, he also enjoyed wide approval from the Latinx community (and others) for creating the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program (DACA) which granted temporary relief from deportation for young, mostly Mexican, people brought to the U.S. as children by their parents. George W. Bush, for his part, talked often of the "special relation" with Mexico and actively courted Latinx votes by speaking Spanish, and emphasizing family ties to the Mexican community (Gutiérrez, 2007). As Gutiérrez (2007:70) describes, Bush often emphasized a cultural connection with Mexico by "reminding Latino voters that he spoke Spanish, that his brother Jeb Bush, then Florida's Governor, was married to a Mexican American woman." But despite both proclaiming a commitment to routes to legalization, both administrations relied on detention, criminalization, and deportation. Indeed, during both administrations, immigration policy remained organized around the desirable/undesirable dichotomy.
- 4 DuBois famously argued that the problem of the twentieth century was "the problem of the color line" (1903). As Itzigsohn and Brown (2020) explain, in so far as the color line structured "territorial, political or economic expansion" as well as anti-colonial and anti-imperial struggles, DuBois showed how colonial and imperial *cum* industrial exploitation was "anchored" in this racialized "political and economic organization of the world."
- 5 Organized labor was not, of course, the only source of anti-NAFTA sentiment. For example, environmental activists were vocal opponents who argued that NAFTA would bring about a 'race to the bottom' not only in labor but in environmental regulations.
- 6 Ross Perot, a businessman who ran an independent presidential campaign in 1992 and as a third-party candidate in 1996 began alluding to the "giant sucking sound" from Mexico in a 1992 presidential debate against Bush and Clinton.

- 7 Johnson quotes the Exchange of Letters on Issues Concerning the Negotiation of a North American Free Trade Agreement, H.R. Doc. No. 10, 102d Cong., 1st Sess. 6 (Comm. Print 1991) in which the Bush administration informed Congress as follows: “We have agreed with Mexico that labor mobility and our immigration laws are not on the table in NAFTA talks, with the possible exception of a narrow provision facilitating temporary entry of certain professionals and managers.” Johnson explains, that despite this, some realized at the outset that a trade accord between the United States and Mexico would have migration consequences including, tellingly, the Commissioner of Immigration and Naturalization Service who was quoted in 1992 as stating “if immigration is not formally on the table, someone . . . will sooner or later realize as a practical matter that moving goods and services in international commerce also involves moving the people who trade in those goods and services.”
- 8 As Ackerman (2013) has shown, “illegality” as a trope to describe migrants only began circulating in the late 1970s and was not taken up in common usage or public debate until 1994 in the context of the controversy over Proposition 187 in California, which called for the suspension of public services to persons lacking documentation.
- 9 Migrants, of course, were not deterred despite increased criminalization, heavy militarization, and the appearance of several border walls, though their border-crossing was displaced to more deadly and treacherous terrain, while cyclical migration became more costly and risky—lengthening the time people remained in the U.S. (Fernández-Kelly and Massey 2007).
- 10 A full transcript of this exchange is available: [www.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/1810/24/cnr.18.html](http://www.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/1810/24/cnr.18.html).
- 11 As 2018 research from the Pew Research Center has shown, “[t]he number of unauthorized immigrants living in the United States was lower in 2016 than at any time since 2004. This decline is due mainly to a large drop in the number of new unauthorized immigrants, especially Mexicans, coming into the country.” [www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/11/28/5-facts-about-illegal-immigration-in-the-u-s/](http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/11/28/5-facts-about-illegal-immigration-in-the-u-s/).
- 12 As the Pew Research Center and the American Immigration Council have shown, immigrants are less likely to commit crimes than the U.S. born population, and immigration is also associated with overall safer communities. <http://immigrationimpact.com/2016/04/29/donald-trump-immigration-crime-facts/>.
- 13 Stuart Hall (1981:32) explains the efficacy of “common sense” as follows, “since (like gender) race appears to be given by Nature, racism is one of the most profoundly naturalized of existing ideologies” and therefore most easily evoked with the language of common sense.
- 14 See for example, [www.nytimes.com/2018/11/10/us/deployed-inside-the-united-states-the-military-waits-for-the-migrant-caravan.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/10/us/deployed-inside-the-united-states-the-military-waits-for-the-migrant-caravan.html).

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