

Fear and Hate in Alabama and Beyond: Narratives of Immigration in the Trump Campaign

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ABSTRACT

In August 2015, in one of his first appearances as President-hopeful, Donald Trump galvanized his audience in Mobile, Alabama, by criminalizing immigrants and attacking sanctuary cities. Capitalizing on fear, he referred to the tragic deaths of two white women by the hands of undocumented immigrants. Trump knew those high-profile cases would resonate with Alabamians who have been fed similar rhetoric by Fox News and its echo chamber on the web. This essay explores the use of hate speech and negative portrayals of immigrants during the presidential campaign of Donald Trump with particular attention to the progressive criminalization of foreign-born individuals and Mexicans specifically. It also points to the current discourse dominated today in conservative media by the narrative of security, a narrative that today lumps together illegal immigration, crime, and terrorism.

The essay investigates how such narrative has been reproduced by politicians and media pundits: to begin with, by Kansas Secretary of State and attorney Kris Kobach, who drafted the harshest state-level, anti-immigration bill that passed in 2011 in Alabama, HB 56, which represented an experiment in the “removal by attrition” (or self-deportation) strategy; by the former U.S. Attorney General, Jeff Sessions, once a U.S. Senator from Mobile, renown for being “tough on crime” and for his restrictionist stance on immigration; and by the once-Fox News TV host, Bill O’Reilly, who spearheaded the efforts to pass a law that further criminalize immigrants by establishing mandatory minimums for illegal reentry. The essay explores the role played by self-segregation in reinforcing stereotypical ideas about “the Other;” explains why immigration is the perfect topic to spin; and illustrates the lingering influence of cable TV in “cultivating” views about immigrants. The essay concludes by pointing to the emergence of alternative narratives of immigration in Alabama and beyond and provides further directions for research on the topic.

Keywords: immigration; narrative; Alabama; criminalization; self-segregation; cultivation theory; terrorism; security

“Give us your tired, your poor, your terrorists.”
Jack McCoy (Sam Waterston) in *Law & Order*

INTRODUCTION

“The other day in California, last week. . .” said then President-hopeful Donald Trump pausing to capture the attention of his cheering audience in Mobile, Alabama. “A woman, 66-year-old, a veteran. . . was killed, raped, sodomized, and tortured by an illegal immigrant. We have to do it, we have to do something. We have to do something” (Fox 10 Phoenix, 2015, 02:08-2:23).

It was a rainy, typically muggy day of August in South Alabama, and Trump began his speech by referring to the case of Marilyn Pharis who was brutally murdered by an unauthorized Mexican immigrant who was on probation at the time of the crime (Panzar, 2015).

According to the Donald Trump for President Campaign, around 30,000 (mostly white) people showed up at the Ladd-Peebles Stadium that day of August 2015, a sizeable turnout since the event had been put together in less than three days. In his first appearance in Alabama as a Presidential candidate, Trump opened with remarks on illegal immigration and alleged his position on the issue was not politically expedient (“I took a lot of heat, that I can tell you” - Fox 10 Phoenix, 2015, 01:42-01:45), in the effort to position himself once again as the anti-establishment candidate.

“Illegal immigrants” made up 1.3 percent of Alabama’s population (a total of 65,000), a small percentage if compared to states like Arizona or Texas (Pew Research Center, 2014). Alabama seemed to have other, more urgent issues that needed political solutions—high levels of child poverty, overcrowded prisons and one of the worst education systems in the country.¹

Yet, Trump’s decision to stop in Mobile and open his speech with illegal immigration was not coincidental. He knew this was a topic that resonated with the GOP base in the state. In 2011, the Republican-controlled Legislature had passed what was then considered the most restrictive state-level, anti-immigration bill in the nation. The Beason-Hammon Alabama Taxpayer and Citizen Protection Act (also known as HB56) had provisions that made the lives of many immigrants impossible in Alabama, as documented by the Southern Poverty Law Center report *Alabama’s Shame* (Bauer, 2012): a certain number left the state, though most only temporarily, some “self-deported,” after the bill passed. Even though HB56 was challenged by the courts and mostly struck down and has been considered a failure, its xenophobic appeal and intent definitely activated dormant, anti-immigrant feelings and attitudes in the state. In addition, HB56 previewed locally immigration policies that Trump promised on the campaign trail to implement (once he became President) with the help of the staunchest GOP immigration restrictionists.

SHOCKED AND CONFUSED: ILLEGAL IMMIGRATION, CRIME, TERRORISM,
AND THE NARRATIVE OF SECURITY

In Mobile, the Presidential candidate also mentioned 32-year-old Kate Steinle who had been killed by an undocumented immigrant with prior convictions just a few weeks before; Steinle was randomly shot while walking on the San Francisco pier with her father. The case had sparked much controversy due to San Francisco's status as a "sanctuary city." This wasn't an isolated rhetorical move for Donald Trump. During his Presidential campaign, he routinely utilized the deaths of U.S. citizens to call for restrictive immigration policies and, most infamously, the deportation of all (over 11 million) "illegals." His was an effort to capitalize on the shock-value of a handful of fatal crimes involving unauthorized immigrants. Trump knew what buttons to push with the base of the Republican Party who had been fed similar propaganda by Fox News and the "echo chamber" on the web. That *was* politically expedient.

But this wasn't a novel strategy, just like the election of Donald Trump to the Presidency should have not been "shocking" as many described it. *Horror* better explained what many people felt— as Naomi Klein (2017) put it, "the horror of recognition that we feel when we read effective dystopian fiction or watch good dystopian film" (p. 258).

As Klein (2017) has suggested, racial fear and current xenophobia are rooted into the societal shock wave produced by 9/11, which helped spread Islamophobia and a more generalized fear of *any* "Other." American ideals of inclusion and openness to the world, epitomized by Emma Lazarus's poem on the Statue of Liberty ("Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free") have now turned into an oxymoron, the "cosmopolitan bias" Stephen Miller, Trump's senior policy adviser, recently referred to in his quarrel with CNN's journalist Jim Acosta (Swenson, 2017, August 3). "Like the terrorized prisoner who gives up their names of comrades and renounces his faith, shocked societies often give up things they would otherwise fiercely protect" (Klein, 2007, p.17). In fact, the long-lasting shock of 9/11 and the constant threat of terrorism, reignited by new attacks (or aftershocks) upset the hierarchy of values of lots of folks who ended up endorsing policies meant to produce a perceived sense of security.

In post-9/11 America (and Europe), the enemy was now foreign and was not White. Like most Western societies, the United States has been undergoing a radical demographic transformation, which many increasingly see as a threat to the identity of White America. In addition, racial tension has built up since the killing of Trayvon Martin in 2012 as well as underlying anti-immigrant sentiments resurfaced and became more and more

acceptable to the point that in 2015 Trump could present his outlandish idea of building a 2,000-mile wall across the southern border and still manage to win the Presidential election the following year.

During the campaign, fighting illegal immigration became synonymous of fighting crime and terror, as Trump capitalized on the progressive criminalization of immigrants. This phenomenon was jump-started after the post 9/11 expansion of the definition of “criminal alien;” in fact, the 2005 immigration enforcement program called “Operation Streamline” began the criminal persecution and imprisonment of unlawful border crossers, which explains the recent rise in federal crimes: unlawful reentry into the United States is now criminal (Pew Research Center, 2014). Political analysts, judges, and immigrants advocates “criticized the program for monopolizing federal court and enforcement resources and for preventing the prosecution of more serious offenses” (MPI, 2010). In its second term, the Obama administration tried to counter this trend by prioritizing the removal of individuals with prior felony convictions via the Priority Enforcement Program (PEP), which was terminated by Trump.

The Apprentice host set the tone for the rest of his campaign in the June 2015 speech in which he announced his Presidential candidacy: to him, only “some” Mexican immigrants were “good people.” The rest are “bringing drugs. They’re bringing crime. They’re rapists” (Lerner, 2015, para.13).

Plascencia (2009) has pointed out how the terms “illegal” and “undocumented” migrant has been associated primarily with “ethnic Mexicans.” Yet, the unauthorized population of Mexicans has been actually declining: they were estimated to represent 59% in 2012 according to the Department of Homeland Security, but they now barely reach half of it, whereas undocumented migrants from Asia and Central America were on the rise as of 2016, according to the Pew Research Center (2017).

To further the association of illegal immigration with crimes, Trump claimed that they were “two, it could even be three million, people with criminal records” among the ones in the country illegally in a post-election CBS’s 60 Minutes interview (CBS, 2016, 09:52-56). But the Migration Policy Institute came up with an estimate of 820,000 of undocumented immigrants removable based on the DHS criteria of criminal convictions (Rosenblum, 2015). And only 300,000, or less than 3 percent of the 11.2 million undocumented immigrants present in the country, have been convicted of a felony (Yee, Davis & Patel, 2017, March 6).

Yet, Trump was able to exploit the issue thanks to the master narrative of fear and hate, prevalent in conservative media and spearheaded by Fox News, a narrative that today lumps together illegal immigration, crime, and terrorism. He also understood the importance of culture and politics and

tailored his campaign to gather votes where the electorate was more prone to receive his message. In this scenario, Alabama was the perfect receptacle for his propaganda machine, and immigration the ideal issue.

At the 2016 Republican National Convention, Trump brought in new evidence in his politically expedient crusade against sanctuary city policies: Sabine Durden and Mary Ann Mendoza, whose children had been killed by undocumented immigrants, gave their testimonies. Durden, a broken-hearted parent in search of a way to get justice of some sort over the loss of her son, was another pawn in Trump's plan to further his harsh immigration policies. These two cases were carefully selected by the Trump campaign: Dominic Daniel Durden, 30, born in Germany, was a 911 dispatcher; Sgt. Brandon Mendoza, 32, was a police officer. Both victims were young men of color—Durden was biracial as attested by his close-up shot, camping behind his mother at the podium at the convention in Cleveland; Mendoza was, as many in the mestizo state of Arizona, of Mexican descent. Both were men of service, so to speak. They serve their communities—Durden in Riverside, California, and Mendoza in Mesa, Arizona. They were, in other words, model, non-White citizens. They embodied the desirable way to be non-White in Trump America, and they proved that all-American virtues were not at all confined to the realm of whiteness. Thus, they also serve to counter the idea that the GOP had become “the White people” party.

Upon accepting the nomination, Trump referred once again to those cases. “‘My opponent wants sanctuary cities,’ (. . .). ‘But where was sanctuary for Kate Steinle? Where was sanctuary for the children of Mary Ann, Sabine and Jamiel?’” (Político, 2016) and little mattered that those deaths did not actually take place within a sanctuary city (Sakuma, 2016).

Despite Trump's rhetoric, there is evidence that public safety actually *improves* in sanctuary cities as a result of increasing trust and better relations between immigrant communities and the police (Cornelius, García, & Varsanyi, 2017). Fact-based research consistently shows that both documented and undocumented immigrants are *less likely* than U.S. citizens to commit serious crimes (among others, see Norwraسته, 2015). Despite the claims that Mexico is sending its worst kind of people, immigrants, including Mexicans, are contributors to local economies. For instance, they thrive in small entrepreneurship. According to the Fiscal Policy Institute (2012), in Alabama, immigrants are in fact 10 percent more likely than U.S. born residents to be small business owners. Yet, this is not the perception of large part of the public opinion.

If there aren't alternative facts, there surely are alternative realities. The Trump campaign reaped the benefits of the alternative reality that Fox News, Breitbart, and the rest of the conservative media have created for them in the last few years. A reality in which “the American people” are at

risk, not safe, economically disadvantaged, all because of one foreign enemy or another. Trump's discourse tapped into the pervasive misconceptions and stereotypes about immigrants, Mexicans, and Latin@s in general. It has taken advantage of the conflation of terms "illegal," "Mexican," and "criminal," and of the progressive criminalization of dark-skinned immigrants in the aftermath of 9/11.

Historically, representations of immigrants have taken on a variety of connotations. When the Immigration and Nationality Act passed in 1965, immigrants were considered contributors to the country, and the idea of the United States as a nation of immigrants prevailed. Sure, Mexicans were not even considered immigrants at that time; the term chiefly referred to Eastern and Southern Europeans who had finally reached key power positions and thus had been allowed to partake to the American Dream—and thus "whitened" in the process. Mae Ngai (2004) pointed out how the very notion of national origin was invented for Europeans (p. 4).

The dominant representations of the immigrants today are not positive: they are here to "take our jobs," and "reap off the benefits of our system" rather than contribute to the economy, the culture, and the diversity of the United States of America. Leo Chavez (2013) has debunked "the Latino Threat narrative" the idea that Latin@s (and Mexicans specifically) are radically different from other groups, unwilling to integrate into the national community, threatening the American way of life, and ultimately eager to reconquer land once their own.

Otto Santa Ana (2013) specifically argues that representations of Latinos as criminals are now dominant. The public understands immigrants *metaphorically*, he maintains; while during the 1990s the prevalent metaphor for immigrants in U.S. public discourse was animals, by 2004 immigrants became increasingly "metaphorized" as criminals (p.159 -161). Mexicans, often conflated with 'immigrants' and 'illegals' in the public discourses, have been routinely associated with crime by new nativists as also shown by Robin Dale Jacobson's book (2008) on Proposition 187 and the related debate over immigration.

Media and cultural representations affect the way people make sense of reality; the stories that they are routinely told about the immigrants influence their understanding of them; in other words, attention should be given to the *narratives* that are being used to report on immigrants and immigration. The Trump campaign could in fact capitalize on tragedies like the ones mentioned above because of the post-9/11, overarching narrative of hate and fear spread by Fox News and its neonativist, echo chamber on the web, a narrative that poses the foreign-born as a threat and the lax policies of the Obama administration as endangering "the American people."

Such master narrative has been accompanied by a narrative of security,

which conflates two perceived needs: the one “to protect the country” from criminals bringing in drugs and diseases from south of the border and the one “to protect the country” from foreign-born, Muslim terrorists. In the process, the Wall became a symbol, a physical barrier against all-things-Un-American: a way to protect the whiteness of the nation while claiming to secure the border. And little matter, as Santa Ana (2013) noted, that “the appeal of narrative is not ‘empirical’, or factual,” (p. 215). It worked.

Nowrasteh (2016) has pointed out that “[t]he chance of an American being murdered in an attack committed by an illegal immigrant is an astronomical 1 in 10.9 *billion* a year,” according to a risk analysis conducted by the Cato Institute (p. 1). Yet, Santa Ana (2013) found that media-generated perceptions regarding immigrants or foreign individuals are much more effective because “narrative demonstrates its ‘dramaturgical’ power to embody fears, hopes, and prejudices of the audiences” (p.215). Take *Law & Order*, a show popular among Trump supporters (Katz, 2016). In the finale of the 12th season (“Patriot”), Tasker (2012) has noted that a former Special Forces officer, Frank Miller, played by Terry Serpico, murders an undocumented Yemenite immigrant who is suspected of plotting a terrorist attack (p.56). Regardless of the narrative of the episode, the status (or, rather, the lack thereof) of the foreign-born individual is linked to the issue of terrorism.

It’s worth recalling that no one of the 9/11 attackers was in the country illegally - eighteen were on tourist visas, and one was on a student visa; as Nowrasteh (2016) found, between 1975 and 2015, ten terrorists were without legal status in the U.S., a mere 6.5 percent of all terrorists (p. 8).

Despite the ubiquity of social media, television still influences the priorities of millions of Americans; in other words, it sets their agenda. People form their opinions about issues on the basis of what they watch, how much of it, and the trusted people they talk to. Television offers a centralized system of storytelling while constantly providing myths, representations, and lessons that help us make sense of the social world and legitimize its order, as Morgan et al. (2009) found. Up until 2013, Gallup (2013) reported that television still constituted the number one source of news. And while network TV news was stable in 2015, the Pew Research Center (2016) found that cable TV news experienced a growth bump partially driven by the public’s interest in the 2016 presidential campaign.

Social media and the Internet often work to reinforce beliefs and attitudes previously held by its users. Evidence of that comes from trends that show that the social networks of Americans tend to be more homogeneous today than in the past, and that is even more so when it comes to White Americans. Forty percent of them, according to a Reuters/Ipsos poll (2013), and 25 percent of non-White Americans are surrounded exclusively by

friends of their own race. In addition, a 2013 American Values Survey showed that Whites tend to hang out with other White Americans (91 percent) and that 75 percent of them reported to discuss important matters only with other Whites. This trend to self-segregate also explain, in my opinion, why Black America and Hispanic America and Asia America look at race relations differently. They just see a different country. They look at the shootings of unarmed men of color as part of a broader pattern and the widespread law enforcement practices of racial profiling, whereas most Whites look at these cases as isolated incidents that need to be contextualized and often excused in the name of the police officers' own protection, as reported by *The Atlantic* (2014). Social media doesn't "de-segregate us." Conversely, it has often contributed to insulate us further by reinforcing pre-existing ideas about others.

The Pew Research Center (2012) has shown that divisions between conservatives and liberals along party lines have never been so clear with corresponding dramatically different worldviews and value systems. Yet, it is still "the American people" that is posed as a term of reference in the public discourses. But when it comes to attitudes towards immigrants, television consumption is more influential than party affiliation—a more accurate way to describe the electorate should be then "the Fox News people" or "the CNN people."

Fox News specifically has played a key role in creating an alternative reality for conservative viewers while disseminating xenophobia and hate. At the time of Trump's victory in the presidential election, Fox News scored the most-watched month since 2012 (Katz, 2016). In November 2016, "Fox News claimed 14 of the top 15 cable news programs in total viewers and 13 of the top 15 in the 25-54 demo," as reported by AdWeek.

Perceptions of media credibility are driven by ideology and partisanship; yet, according to the findings from the 2014 Public Religion Research and Brookings Institutions' Religion, Values, and Immigration Reform Survey, being a Republican has only a modest impact on opinions about immigration reform, while trust in Fox News is a determining factor (p. 2). Six in ten Republicans whose most trusted news source is Fox News say that immigrants are a burden, while one-third say immigrants strengthen the country because of their hard work and talents. In contrast, among Republicans who most trust other news sources, 56 percent say immigrants today strengthen the country because of their hard work and talents, while 38 percent deem immigrants a burden (p. 9).

In the election year of 2016, *The O'Reilly Factor* was the most watched cable news program with an average of 4.1 million viewers. On the Fox News show, O'Reilly conflated the issues of illegal immigration, crime, and terrorism in the name of security for "the American people." The

latter entity is cast by both O'Reilly and Trump alike as ethically superior, resilient, yet "under attack." "The American people" then becomes what Richard Weaver (1985) has called an "ultimate term," a rhetorical absolute "to which the very highest respect is paid" (p. 212). "The American people" is an uncontested term because of America's self-perceived sense of superiority. Its people are resilient, and that is why America will be "great again." Appealing to "the American people" in political and public discourses in general has a sort of legitimizing effect as if this entity is deserving of all the attention, and, rhetorically, the term accrues whatever sentiments and needs the speaker wants it to have. In other words, actual Americans may have very diverging takes and opinions on a variety of issues, including immigration; yet, rhetorically, they are presented as if they didn't actually and all shared similar fears and xenophobic sentiments.

The "Talking Points" commentary segment aired on November 23, 2015, "The Real Story about Syrian Refugees," is a case in point (Fox News, 2015). The commentary opens on the issue of the "Syrian crisis," which presumes that Syrian refugees are *all* Muslim and, as such, present a terroristic threat to the United States—while the latter have never committed a terroristic attack in the U.S. as Friedman pointed out in *The Atlantic* (2017, January 30).

At 1:20 of the segment, O'Reilly shifts its focus to the issue of immigration. The following slide appears on the screen.

Illegal immigrant children crossing the southwest border

- Nearly 5,000 unaccompanied children caught in October.
- Nearly 3,000 caught in first half of November

(Washington Times, citing Border Patrol data)

"The fact," O'Reilly continues, the southern border remains "porous." At 1:45, the host drives his point home: "the Obama administration has not been able to secure the southern border, despite the deadly terror threat facing America," we/he read(s) on the slide that appears behind him. Then O'Reilly goes on to provide some data regarding the convicted criminal aliens freed in 2013 based on "a document obtained by the Center for Immigration Studies,"² O'Reilly claims President Obama lost "all credibility on matter of security."

In a rhetorical move meant to provide a sense of objectivity, as if a collective of experts and journalists had come to such conclusion, O'Reilly hides behind his moniker, "Talking Points," while stating his opinion: "no more generosity to overseas visitors"(Fox News, 2015, 03:44-47). The commentary shifts focus once more to reframe the discussion over border

security as the host advances his own policy proposal regarding mandatory minimums for illegal reentry. In fact, in a clear example of how the media agenda majorly influences (if not actually sets) the political agenda, O'Reilly spearheaded the efforts to pass the so-called "Kate's Law," the Establishing Mandatory Minimums for Illegal Reentry Act of 2015, which "amends the Immigration and Nationality Act to increase penalties applicable to aliens who unlawfully reenter the United States after being removed" (Congress.gov, 2015). The bill was named after Kate Steinle, who was killed at the hand of a convicted felon and undocumented immigrant on the San Francisco pier. The law intended to establish mandatory minimums for illegal reentry, which would, as a result, provide a constant flow of immigrants in detention centers across the country.

In his commentary, O'Reilly uses dubious research provided by Fox News polls and the Center for Immigration Studies, a spin-off of the Federation for American Immigration Reform founded by John Tanton and labeled a "hate group" by the Southern Poverty Law Center. Among others, CIS put out a report authored by Camarota and Vaughan (2009) in which it was falsely claimed that immigrants have higher rates of criminality than U.S. born citizens. For instance, it claimed that foreign-born comprised one-fourth of the inmate population, while the Bureau of Judicial Statistics says it's only 5 percent (September 2014).

O'Reilly uses ultimate terms such as "truth," "fact," and "The American people" to advance a xenophobic narrative of security and promote a framework of understanding to conservative viewers. The real chance of being murdered by a refugee in a terroristic attack is in the United States of America is 1 in 3,64 billion (Nowrasteh, 2016, p. 1). Yet, O'Reilly gets away with his rhetoric because the dominant representations (post 9/11) are consistent with the narratives he is proposing.

Another politician who has been pivotal in spreading the idea that refugees are potential terrorists is Kris Kobach, as he recently illustrated in his first op-ed for Breitbart in July 2017 titled "Refugees and Terrorism: A Massive Vulnerability in our Immigration System." After all, it was Kobach that, while serving as U.S. Attorney General John Ashcroft's chief advisor, authored the National Security Entry-Exit Registration System, the controversial program (shut down in 2011) that required fingerprinting of Muslim and Middle Eastern visa holders. And it was Kobach who drafted HB56 and promoted the doctrine of "removal by attrition" (or "self-deportation"), a foe of immigrants indeed, and champion of "legalism," as I illustrated in *Here We May Rest* (2017).

In addition, asylum seekers and refugees, often products of the very wars in the Middle East the United States triggered, are constructed as deviant and threatening types, their bodies made invisible, confined in intern-

ment camps, symbols of the new world order (Mirzoeff, 2005, p. 145); in the United States, hidden in the hundreds of detention centers that dot middle-of-nowhere America.

Capitalizing on these negative portrayals, O'Reilly's *Talking Points* offered an often seemingly logical frame of understanding for conservative voters. During the 2016 Presidential campaign, O'Reilly helped cast Donald Trump as an anti-establishment figure, "a tough-talking political novice" who represented the real alternative to those Democrats and Republicans who have failed to give "the American people" the answers to the daunting problems—be it "the ISIS terror threat" or "the immigration mess"—they expected.

O'Reilly cherry-picks the data in his effort to create a seemingly coherent and persuasive narrative in a prime example of what Kovach and Rosenstiel (2010) call "journalism of affirmation" (p. 147). During the campaign, *Talking Points* provided the needed haven for those who were looking for answers to the Trump phenomenon. O'Reilly stood out because of his large following,³ but today the dominant source of information for topics like immigration is journalism of affirmation, where evidence tends to be preselected to prove a point and becomes a tool in an argument.

To sum up, the media sources people use, the TV channels they decide to expose themselves to, shape their understanding of the world today more than ever. Trump further mainstreamed hate speech and anti-immigrant sentiments. Yet O'Reilly was there to excuse Trump for his excesses in the name of some needed "anti-political correctness," and, thus, routinely justified the Republican Presidential frontrunner's highly controversial policy positions and inflammatory rhetoric, as Media Matters (2015) put it, "defending the candidate even while disagreeing with him" (para.1). Thus, O'Reilly offered reluctant conservative voters a rationale to vote for Trump by tapping into the shortcomings of the Obama Administration and mostly their perceived need for security.

THE COMPLICATED BUSINESS OF IMMIGRATION &
THE ALABAMAFICATION OF AMERICA.⁴

The lingering question is: why immigration? Why choosing an issue in such a need of fixing, through a bipartisan, comprehensive reform, to spur, instead, controversy, reignite hate politics, and ultimately further divisions in the country?

Immigration is indeed one of those subject matters whose "outcomes are difficult to observe and are often not realized until long after the report is made," as Gentzkow and Shapiro (2006) have shown (p. 286)—in fact, policymaking about the issue seems not to follow actual immigration trends

but to react more to how public opinion feels about the issue at that point in time. “The relative openness or restrictiveness of U.S. policies,” Massey and Pren (2012) maintain, are “more strongly shaped by prevailing economic circumstances and political ideologies” (p. 2) as well as by the dominant media representations of immigrants.

More direct and observable outcomes, such as stock returns, sporting events, and weather forecasts are less likely to have bias, whereas coverage of a foreign war or discussions over the economic impact of an immigration bill are what Gentzkow and Shapiro (2006) call “low-feedback topics,” complicated issues that are subject to more spinning than others. Rather than being lessened by the multiplying of sources of information, this trend is also more prevalent today due to the reduced competition among news outlets, a direct consequence of the segmentation of the market along political lines and the high concentration of media ownership.

Immigration in the age of the journalism of affirmation is thus a malleable topic, ideal for campaign talk, given the many years of failed U.S. immigration policies and the problematic reality of 11 million undocumented immigrants residing on U.S. soil. The legal problems the so-called Muslim ban encountered are proof of that, but they also show how implementing policies based on hatred and discrimination (in this case, based on nationality) is difficult given the check and balance system operating in the American democracy.

In defending the President’s travel ban, former mayor of New York City Rudolph Giuliani unsurprisingly claimed (on Fox News) a need for security, as he pointed to “danger,” not nationality as the focus of the administration, thus once again perpetuating the master narrative of fear and hate (cit. in Friedman, 2017). But if the concern was security why did the original ban include Syrian refugees?⁵

Trump’s xenophobic rhetoric triumphed in Alabama. A News-5/Strategy Research poll in August 2015, at the time of his Mobile rally, found that Trump was overwhelmingly the candidate of choice among Alabama Republicans (Albrecht, 2015). On Super Tuesday, he collected 36 delegates and 43.4 percent of the votes among Republicans—Ted Cruz gained 13 delegates and 21.1 percent of the votes (Frye, 2016). In the general elections, he received 62.8 percent of the votes, which meant all the 9 state’s electoral votes, according to the final election results reported by Politico.com.

In the conservative state, TV is still a dominant influencer, and Fox News is the channel of choice. According to ratings and Nielsen data, Alabamians, in fact, watch television more than residents of any other state. They also love reality shows and especially, top reality game shows, *American Idol*, *Dancing with the Stars*, *X-Factor*, and, of course, *The Apprentice*

(Solomon, 2012). No wonder Alabamians love Trump. The real estate magnate and reality game TV sensation multi-billionaire is an American Silvio Berlusconi (Merelli, 2016), but to most in the South he is chiefly an updated, improved 21st century version of George Wallace. Just like the beloved, long-time racist governor, Trump hates *The New York Times*; as the Alabama politician's daughter, Peggy Wallace Kennedy, pointed out to *Buzz Feed*, Trump has adopted "the notion that fear and hate are the two greatest motivators of voters." "My father (. . .) was able to "tap into the fears of poor and working-class White people" (Kaczynski & McDermott, 2016).

Little mattered that Alabama has one of the smallest number of immigrants in the United States. The *perception* was different. People experience innumeracy, the tendency to perceive immigrant and minority populations as larger than they are in reality, which contributed to the "racial threat" phenomenon, as Herda (2010) has found. Yes, the recent exponential growth of the immigrant population was real. In Alabama, the foreign-born share rose from 1.1 percent in 1990, to 2.0 percent in 2000, to 3.4 percent in 2011, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. And most significantly, "the browning of America" was now transforming Alabama also. A new destination for immigrants from Mexico and Central America, Alabama had witnessed a dramatic demographic shift. If the top three countries of birth countries of birth of the foreign-born in 1990 were Germany (9.8 percent), the United Kingdom (8.0 percent), and Canada (6.0 percent), by 2010, the top three were Mexico (40.6 percent), Guatemala (5.7), and India (4.6 percent) (Batalova/MPI Data Hub, 2015, November 5, personal communication). Alabama followed a geographic trend seen in other Southern and Midwestern states: a high demand for cheap, pliable labor force has been a major magnet for the vertically-integrated poultry production industry located in the rural South. Several other factors contributed to these novel pathways: the labor market saturation in traditional immigrant hubs; the aggressive recruitment in Central America and Mexico of meat processing, forestry, and carpet manufacturing industries; the liberalization of Mexican economy in the 1990s with its dire consequences for small farmers in Southern Mexico; and the increased geographic mobility for 2.3 million newly legalized workers after the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act.

But the general public is rarely offered these sociological, historical, and economic explanations. Our visual culture trumps (no pun intended) all that. All one sees on TV are images of the "humiliated and hunted" deported, faceless bodies otherwise breaking their backs in the fields of rural America or daily jeopardizing their limbs working in the fast lines of the chicken plants of Arkansas or Alabama, as an SPLC report (2013)

showed. In an editorial that appeared in *The New York Times*, Héctor Tobar (2017) aptly called such approach to immigration “porn.” But there is also qualitative evidence that TV exposure heightens innumeracy, which is a way to say that our perceptions are altered by what we watch, as Gallagher (2013) found. Actually, it’s not even *what* we watch, but *how much* of it. According to cultivation theory, heavy TV consumers are more prone to espouse the dominant ideas and representations (Morgan et al. 2009, p. 42). Resentment and general attitudes towards immigrants have been *cultivated* with persistent negative media and cultural representations of immigrants as well as negative discourses around immigration—the lack of diversity of images deprives the represented of their dignity, and, in the end, of their humanity, thus objectifying them in the process: pornographic indeed.

On the campaign trail, Trump kept on proposing his “quick and easy” recipe to fix the immigration: “deport them all” and “build a Chinese Wall between the United States and Mexico.” “I am ‘the Law and Order’ candidate,” Trump said.

Trump’s cultural reference, for instance, was not casual and turned out to be rather telling: as Forbes revealed, his son-in-law, Jared Kushner, did in fact engineer a campaign by mapping which shows were popular where - “NCIS for anti-ObamaCare voters or *The Walking Dead* for people worried about immigration” (Bertoni, 2016, para. 4). Rural Americans were watching more than elsewhere *Duck Dynasty*, *NCIS* and *Criminal Minds* (as in Clanton, Alabama) (Katz, 2016, December 26). They may not personally know the immigrant that works in one of the many local chicken-processing plants—the state of Alabama is second only to Arkansas in broiler production—but they surely know and recognize the one that appears on TV because it has been *repeatedly* seen—stereotypically criminalized or, at the very least, deprived of dignity, in representations that are, indeed, “pornographic.” It so happened that Trump referred to Mexican immigrants as “bad hombres” and got away with it (CNN, 2016).

In Mobile, Trump called a short, white-haired senator on stage. This was the senator’s hometown, the place where as the U.S. attorney for the Southern District of Alabama he had risen through the ranks and become renown for being “tough on crime.” Mobile was also the county where the last lynching case of an African American young man has been recorded in the not-so-long-ago 1981. Perhaps the general public didn’t know Senator Jeff Sessions well at that time, but black civil rights activists in Alabama did, and so did immigrant advocates. Sessions’ racist and politically charged actions as an U.S. attorney first and his staunch restrictionist take on immigration as a U.S. senator later spoke volumes regarding his linings.

As it turned out, Trump became President and Sessions Attorney General. One of Trump’s first executive orders promised a crackdown on sanc-

tuary cities; Trump threatened withholding federal funds and grants if sanctuary cities and counties were not to comply with immigration law. Shortly after, Sessions added fuel to the fire in a guest appearance to the White House Press Briefing: the now-Attorney General repeated the myth of the “criminal illegal aliens,” a mix bag of rapists, murderers, and child molesters, terrorizing all-American and immigrant communities alike. At the time of writing, the battle over sanctuary cities is still ongoing; and as Pema Levy (2017) has pointed out, if Trump succeeds in implementing his executive orders regarding it, his may well be a self-fulfilling prophecy— withholding federal grants will negatively affect law enforcement and thus hurt public safety.

The current narratives of immigration, based on hate and fear of “the Other,” camouflaged in the name of security, have consequences—one price tag price: thousands have been victims of the hate crimes since the election with a 6%-increase estimated as of June 2017 by the Center for the Study of Hate & Extremism.

Discriminatory and xenophobic rhetoric produce individuals who feel entitled to act upon their most hateful sentiments. And to step up their game, they don’t need an army as the “lone wolf” phenomenon has shown (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2017). Unsurprisingly, the number of hate groups in the United States continues to rise for the third year in a row as the radical right was energized by Trump, according to the SPLC’s (2018) annual census of hate groups and extremist organizations.

ALTERNATIVE NARRATIVES

Alternative narratives do exist. They create welcoming realities, places where tolerance and unity are priorities and appropriate, and non-offensive, inclusive language is regarded as a shared value and not as much despised “political correctness.” The tragic deaths of U.S. citizens by the hands of undocumented immigrants have also activated narratives of love and compassion that counter the ones capitalizing on fear and tragedy the Trump campaign deployed.

In fact, for every Sabine Durden there is an Ellin Jimmerson. A Huntsville-based Baptist minister, a film maker and a long-time advocate for the immigrants, Rev. Jimmerson’s daughter and her boyfriend were killed in car accident by an undocumented immigrant who was under the influence. Leigh Anna was only 16. That was 2009, and yet, such a tragedy has not stopped Jimmerson from advocating for sensible, comprehensive immigration reform. In a July 2011, anti-HB56 rally held in Huntsville, the reverend gave a speech, which was later published in the local papers as an open letter to Gov. Robert Bentley and the sponsors of the immigration bill, Sen.

Scott Beason and Rep. Mickey Hammon. In the letter, Jimmerson recalled an event she participated in with Leigh Anna, in Athens, Alabama, about two years before her death. “The Ku Klux Klan was holding an anti-immigrant protest. We went to participate in a counter-protest. And I remember her holding a neon—yellow sign, as big as she was, that had one word written on it in big, black letters: LOVE” (Jimmerson, 2011, para. 8 & 9). In the August of 2017, in the aftermath of the tragic events in Charlottesville, where white nationalists assaulted peaceful counter-protesters, and a Nazi sympathizer, James Alex Field, plowed into the crowd killing one young woman, Jimmerson posted on her Facebook page: “Love You Back. One of my favorites memories of Leigh Anna keeps running through my head today.” (Jimmerson, 2017, Facebook status update) In recalling that rally she participated in with her daughter, Jimmerson wrote, “a Klansman said something rude to her. She never would tell me what it was he had said. But I heard her laugh and shout to him: ‘Love you back!’” (Jimmerson, 2017, Facebook status update).

In the 2011 open letter, Jimmerson pleaded the Alabama leaders to repeal HB56; she recognized that “recklessness does not belong only to drunk drivers (. . .) it “also belongs to powers, princes, and potentates who wash their hands of the grieving people they accept as the collateral damage of their policies and programs” (Jimmerson, 2011, para. 16 &17). The pastor likened HB56 to John Newton’s “deadly ship filled with desperate, grieving human beings bound for slavery:” “HB 56 is a deadly ship (. . .) filled with nothing but more broken families, more broken hearts, and more broken dreams” (Jimmerson, 2011, para. 24). Jimmerson also joined other religious leaders and pastors across the state in a lawsuit against HB56.

Finally, there is another important narrative that needs to be changed: the one that racializes terror. Fact is, if one excludes 9/11, White Americans are the cause of the largest number of terrorism-related deaths on U.S. soil. “Nationals of the seven countries singled out by Trump have killed zero people in terrorist attacks on U.S. soil between 1975 and 2015” (Friedman, 2017, para. 5). Terrorism is living in a country where people cannot go to the school or to the movies without watching over their shoulders and wonder “what if a guy with an AR-15 walks in here now. . . what do I do?” This is terror.

Domestic terrorism is as much of a threat as foreign-born terrorism: the difference is, we have known it for a long time but have failed to acknowledge it publicly, call it for what it is. From the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing where 168 people were killed to the 2015 Black church mass shooting at the hands of Dylann Roof in Charleston, South Carolina, up until the Charlottesville, Virginia, domestic terrorism *is* a product of White America, and more specifically of White Male America—it is often the

angry, extreme response to the demographics transformation and civil rights advancements of the nation; it is also often a form of “mass hate crime” towards those minorities, including the immigrants, who are affecting such change.

Back in Alabama, a change in the narrative is already happening. In December 2017, Doug Jones won the Senate seat that once was Sessions’ with a platform based on reasonable, moderate politics. Most important, he won over Roy Moore, a Christian, gun-lover, fanatic with lots of sympathizers in the state. (*Perhaps that was a step in the directions of a de-Alabamafication of American politics?*)

In the capital of Montgomery, a museum dedicated to lynching, the first of its kind, opened in April 2018. Attorney and Equal Justice Initiative founder, Bryan Stevenson, and his team have launched the cultural project to change the narrative of terrorism in the United States. The idea is both to memorialize and mark the territory, to unearth and make visible the sites where acts of White-on-Black terrorism occurred. Because if you change the narrative (and the landscape), you are a step away from changing the reality of people. Even in the South. Even in Alabama. Only then, the immigrants will really find their sweet home in Alabama.

FURTHER DIRECTIONS AND RESEARCH

The full extent of the role played by fake news in spreading hate and fostering xenophobic sentiments during the 2016 presidential campaign and beyond is worth further attention. Case in point is what happened in Twin Falls, Idaho, where a sexual assault involving three children (a white American girl, age 5 and two refugees, age 7 and 10 from Iraq and Sudan) was turned by right-wing media with the aid of the Russian government into a false story that brought a media maelstrom to the small town, as reported by Caitlin Dickerson of *The New York Times* (2017). In the mounting of fake reporting, Syrian refugees were said to be involved (whereas they were none living in the town), ISIS was brought in and generally right-wing media gave the idea that Twin Falls was “under attack” by religiously-motivated (read, Muslim) fanatics. Fake Facebook accounts linked to the Russian government made real life events happened in the town on the basis of completely fabricated information, which became the first know Russian attempt to have a political rally on U.S. soil, as reported by Dickerson.

The general hysteria generated by this case signals to worrying tendencies enabled by self-segregation and selective exposure, which results in having audiences becoming oblivious to factual information; ultimately, it points to the difficult task citizens have nowadays to get to the truth of the matter.

Lastly, Fact Check (2018) has pointed out how the Trump Administration and its right-wing media allies have also developed the habit of constantly calling for “fake news” as a dismissal strategy. The rhetorical use of “fake news” as a buzzword should be further investigated.

NOTES

1. According to the National Center for Children in Poverty, 27 percent of children in Alabama (vs. 21% nationwide) live in poverty—the estimate is conservative because the United States still measures poverty according to outdated standards (NCCP, 2015). In Alabama, “more than 24,00 inmates are housed in a system for half that number” (Brown, 2016). In 2016, Alabama placed 5th worst in the country and received a D+ report card (*Education Week*, 2016).

2. Here is the link to the CIS report cited by O’Reilly <http://cis.org/ICE-Documents-Details-36000-Criminal-Aliens-Release-in-2013>.

3. Since this essay was first conceived, O’Reilly has been fired by Fox News over sexual harassment allegations. It’s worth noting that Fox News did not fire the host until advertisers began to divest from the channel. Neither O’Reilly nor former Fox News chairman Roger Ailes also accused of sexual harassment ever publicly apologized to their audience (Hoover, 2017).

4. I borrowed the expression and used it loosely from Kyle Whitmire (2016) who first coined in Roy Moore, Robert Bentley, Mike Hubbard and the Alabamification of America.

5. The revised executive order, released in March 2017 lifted the indefinite ban on Syrian refugees (White House, 2017).

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