Borders as Mirrors: Racial Hierarchies and Policing Migration

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Abstract

This article considers how state-controlled borders and bordering practices are conceptualized, what they symbolize, and the consequences of these representations. By analyzing critically the metaphors that are used to describe borders and migration, and by drawing on empirical research on policing migration in the United Kingdom, an alternative metaphor, where borders are depicted heuristically as mirrors, may be instructive for capturing the multiple functions of borders and their racializing consequences. I propose that borders and their control across Western liberal democracies are like mirrors that represent, reflect and, at times, deflect the reality of exclusionary attitudes and the racialized anxieties they foment. Harnessing the function of borders through a process of self-reflection, where societies hold a mirror to themselves, may be both instructive and transformative. By reconsidering the metaphors employed in relation to migration, the article contributes to interdisciplinary debates on border studies, critical race perspectives and the criminalization of mobility.

Introduction

Borders and bordering practices have prompted a gamut of critical empirical and conceptual analysis to explore some of the novel concerns raised by contemporary migration (Casas-Cortes et al. 2015). These analyses have encouraged us to rethink borders, particularly what and where borders are and the purposes they serve, as well as inspiring questions about temporality and inviting us to ask: when is a border a *border*? (Anderson et al. 2009). In this article, I contribute to this interdisciplinary corpus in border studies, critical criminology and critical race studies by proposing that borders and their control across Western liberal democracies are like mirrors that represent, reflect and, at times, deflect and obscure the image of Western democracies and liberal attitudes toward racial others. Conceptualized as mirrors, the transformative function of borders, alongside their aim to preserve racial and colonial hierarchies across the world, becomes more apparent.

Borders have undoubtedly transformed cities and policing, as well as categories of belonging and the mobility of migrant groups (Back and Sinha 2018; Weber 2013). The

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digital age has also brought new technological tools which migrants reclaim to navigate, respond and resist bordering practices, creating counter-narratives of migration (Milivojevic 2019). Alongside the change and mobility inherent to bordering and migration¹ in contemporary times, we are reminded of the productive capacity of the state to make and maintain race through bordering regimes. Despite the inherent mobility associated with borders, they can engender stasis and inertia, demonstrating the facticity of racial hierarchies that govern mobility for some and not others (Bosworth et al. 2018). Perceptions of racial undesirability and processes of exclusion, removal and deportation have gone hand in hand, and continue to do so now (Gabaccia 1997; Sigona and Trehan 2011).

Within this context of the multiple dimensions and functions of borders that other scholars have identified, I propose that when borders are understood as *mirrors* as opposed to *boundaries* and *lines*, or *barriers* and *walls*, their inherently ambiguous, fluid and protean nature can be captured meaningfully. The multidimensionality of borders and their simultaneous banality alongside the exceptionalism they can conjure are comprehensible when we conceive of borders as mirrors. Borders can deflect scrutiny away from racist attitudes by allowing the media, the public and politicians to convey the idea that migration control and racism are separate issues and to advance the claim that concerns about migration are about a strain on public resources or potential criminality as opposed to xenophobia (Garner 2018). In this respect, borders serve to reflect and magnify anxieties about crime, security and the fear of difference that are present in the national body, and the focus on borders acts simultaneously as a two-way cause of and solution to these concerns (Foner and Simon 2015). In the same way that two-way mirrors function—transparent on one side and reflective on the other—and thereby promote distanced surveillance, the heuristic device of the mirror creates a number of dimensions that reveals the performative and productive capacity of borders. Policing migration policies are one example of this two-way mirror of invisible surveillance that borders engender and that are discussed later in this article. The reconceptualization of borders as relational processes and as sites of struggle allows borders to be reimagined beyond their exclusionary function, affording possibilities for the impermanence of borders or a borderless world to be imagined and their transformative potential to be calibrated (Segrave and Wonders 2019).

This article draws on empirical research on the policing of migration in the United Kingdom (UK) to demonstrate how borders operate as mirrors at micro- and macro-levels, and the role of borders in ensuring that experiences of belonging are liminal for racial minorities. The article begins with a discussion about the metaphors that have been used to describe migration in newspapers and academic analyses, followed by an examination of how bordering, criminalization and race intersect, both conceptually and practically. Next, I present an analysis of the function of bordering in terms of holding a mirror to who “we” are or imagine ourselves to be. I then ground the conceptual and theoretical framework adopted in this article by drawing on Stuart Hall’s (1997) theory of representation, as well as critical race studies. Following this, I discuss my empirical research on policing migration in the UK to show how border practices operate. As part of this analysis, I offer evidence of the metaphors and forms of rationalizations applied by police and immigration

¹ While I recognize the language of exclusion that shapes concepts such as migration, immigration and citizenship (Nunez 2014), throughout this article, I most often refer to “migration” rather than “immigration,” given the negative and control-oriented connotations that frame the latter in the British context. When referring to official policy or legislation or research on or from the United States (US), however, I employ the term “immigration” to ensure accuracy of meaning in reference to its usage in those contexts.

agents as they perform their daily work. Here, I draw further on the borders as mirrors concept to show how the multiple dimensions and practices of bordering can be interpreted in light of the empirical findings. The article concludes by considering how the heuristic device of understanding borders as mirrors creates a possibility for Western liberal democracies to engage in a process of self-reflection (i.e., by holding a mirror to ourselves).

Borders, Migration and Metaphors

Recent scholarship has engendered a reconceptualization of borders to include a more open reading of border logics, practices and technologies. Such approaches have encouraged us to look beyond the fixed image of the border as a wall and of bordering practices as solely exclusionary (Casas-Cortes et al. 2015). Borders are regarded as inherently multi-dimensional, multifunctional and ontologically ambivalent (Graziano 2018). The productive capacity of borders has been emphasized, as has the need for borders to be considered from a dynamic lens and perceived as a means rather than an end. The social and political contexts that surround border-making processes are key, and borders are recognized for not only restricting access, but also for ensuring that people can enter and leave freely (Brown 2010). Borders are both performative and productive; within the framework of conceptualizing borders as performative, migration has been regarded as a social movement and citizenship has been conceived as a performance (Wonders and Jones 2019). In another illustration of the performative and productive force of borders, President Donald J. Trump's election campaign in the United States (US) in 2016 centered on the promise of "the wall" and since taking office, the president's rallies have continued to call for building a wall along the US border with Mexico. Arguably, "the wall" has served a primarily symbolic function to illustrate the strength of nationalism, rather than the need for national security (Bier 2017).

While discussions about barriers and fences, walls and wires, are rooted in physical forms of architecture designed to keep some people out and some people *in*, non-physical borders are also proving to be restrictive and controlling in diffuse and remote ways (Broeders and Hampshire 2013). The ubiquity of borders beyond checkpoints and geographical countries has resulted in what some have called "everyday bordering" (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013; Yuval-Davis et al. 2018) and bordering responsibilities are increasingly delegated to the public (Aliverti 2015). For example, in the UK, the Immigration Act 2016 brought in new measures to criminalize the provision of rental accommodation to individuals without legal status, to prevent illegal migrants from obtaining driving licenses, and to introduce an information-sharing scheme with the Home Office for migrants seeking medical help from the National Health Service (Webber 2019).

Metaphorically Speaking

Metaphors are often deployed to describe migrants and migration in political and popular discourse and the news media.² For example, migrants are often described as "flows,"

² Broad reference is made to "news media" for illustrative purposes only and my selection of headlines is not random. There is not the space here to provide a diverse set of different media examples or to conduct a comprehensive discourse analysis.

“pests,” “seas” and “waves,” and are likened to “natural disasters,” such as “floods” or “storms.” Former British Prime Minister David Cameron referred to a “swarm of people coming across the Mediterranean” (Shariatmadari 2015). Water is often used in association with migrants and refugees and as modes of communication increasingly employ visual images, water has been employed frequently to depict the process of migration (Gabrielatos and Baker 2008). Newspaper stories enunciate the power of these metaphors, particularly when they are written into the headlines. For example, one online tabloid published the headline: “Flood of illegal migrants highlights border fiasco” (Daily Express 2017), and examples in other outlets include: “Millions of Africans will flood Europe unless it acts now, warns European chief, as Paris evacuates huge migrant camp” (Samuel and Squires 2017); “HMS Bulwark overloaded by migrant tide” (Beale 2015); and “MIGRANTS SWARM TO BRITAIN: Torrent of stowaway migrants on a typical day in borderless UK” (Chapman 2015).

Various forms of media are said to play a constitutive role in framing the migration debate and perceptions of migrants, thereby influencing public understanding significantly (Lamont 2015). Scholars who have analyzed news stories about migration argue that minority groups and refugees are depicted by being associated with rising crime levels and danger (Rasinger 2010). An examination of the *Los Angeles Times* found that metaphors about immigrant workers operated to dehumanize them and advance the idea that “immigrants were animals” to be baited, lured and pitted against others (Santa Ana 1999). The media utilize and corral linguistic tools, metaphors, images and information (as well as the omission of information) to present highly curated perspectives of the migration debate (Langdon 2018).

It is clear that language plays a central role in reference to migration, alongside the power of metaphors, for their capacity to describe situations, events and contexts, and their propensity to influence people’s thinking (Parker 2015). Not only can metaphors paint a vivid picture in ways that flat descriptive words often fall short, but one metaphor can lead to another, resulting in a coherent system of metaphorical concepts and expressions (Lakoff and Johnson 2003). Metaphors are effective because they provide shape to abstract processes and can be used politically and strategically to affect public sentiment in a readily understandable and translatable way (Santa Ana 1999); they are pervasive and a crucial source of influence. In their analysis of the depiction of Syrian refugees, Abid and colleagues (2017) found that persistent metaphors involving water represented an unwelcome disaster, which removed the humanity of Syrian refugees, rendering them indistinguishable and dehumanized entities. Indeed, the use of natural disaster metaphors by the media has resulted in refugees being regarded as a danger to host countries and a source of panic and terror; such is the power of language (Mayr 2008). Visual representations of asylum seekers in British newspapers have also been found to fuse together notions of danger, deviance and otherness to produce panics about male asylum seekers and refugees, framing them as subjects to be feared rather than helped (Banks 2011).

Following the “mobility turn” in the social sciences (Aas 2016; Sheller and Urry 2006), scholars, too, have applied various metaphors to explain borders and their roles as a mode of analysis. For example, borders have been conceptualized as membranes (Bowling 2013), as paradox and power (Papadakis 2017), likened to a computer firewall (Rumford 2008), enabling mobility as well as fixicity (Perkins and Rumford 2013), and as “borderscapes” (Brambillia 2015). Many of the conceptualizations attempt to capture the multiple and concurrent potentialities of borders, as well as the idea that bordering is an active and political process (Van Houtum and Strüver 2002). Others have critiqued representations of migration as a social ill—a poison infecting Europe (De Genova 2010). The duality of borders

is also an often-cited theme—one used to highlight their function in connecting as well as dividing. Borders have an inherently regulatory role insofar as walls and checkpoints serve to manage rather than exclude legal and illegal migrant labor (Brown 2010). Others consider borders to be central to the definition of the state and a permanent “state of exception” ensuring the exercise of biopolitical power (Agamben 2005; Salter 2008). Border security practices are gendered and racialized and pre-emptive in coding particular bodies as dangerous, suspicious and warranting further scrutiny (Basham and Vaughan-Williams 2012). The nature of *control* in border control has also been examined, as has the growth in industries and technologies that enable and profit from border security (Andersson 2014; Walters 2006). Borders are not just devices for blocking or obstructing global “flows,” but have become essential devices for the articulation of globalization (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013). The primacy of performance in borders has been highlighted (Wonders and Jones 2019) and the digital technologies and linked databases that shape border control have also been scrutinized for their racializing consequences (Parmar 2019). The role of technologies in influencing decision-making and discretion at the border have also been examined, highlighting the uncertain and visual nature of these practices when they occur. Such studies have also underscored that border security practices should be explored from the vantage point of actors that are involved in this daily work (Cote-Boucher et al. 2014; Hall 2017). The use of metaphors in academic circles has also been critiqued for being unable to reconcile border studies debates which have coalesced around binary pairings of border discourse (e.g., open versus closed, inside versus outside) (Lalonde 2018; Newman 2006; Parker and Vaughan-Williams 2009).

Race, Borders and Criminalization

Although early writers noted that borders provide an opportunity for cultures and ethnic groups to fuse and exchange ideas, goods and services, and that borders are what people make of them (e.g., Hannerz 1997), borders have been understood mostly to mean keeping “others” out. Immigration violations are increasingly criminalized and dealt with punitively because of the merger between criminal law and immigration law (Stumpf 2006), along with a corresponding intensification of surveillance and scrutiny toward visible racial minorities (Parmar 2019). Appeals to racial animosity to mobilize voter support in the US, for example, have moved from a direct focus on African-American people to condemning immigrants by framing Muslims and Latinos as representative of inherent crime threats (Brown 2016). As everyday bordering practices advance, the negative impact on racial minorities—not only irregular migrants³—has intensified. For instance, immigration enforcement raids were conducted disproportionately to business owners belonging to minority ethnic groups as part of the UK’s “hostile environment” following implementation of the Immigration Act 2016 (Armenta 2017; Yuval-Davis et al. 2018).

One of the most significant aspects of borders is their capacity to uphold racial hierarchies and ensure uneven access to citizenship along racialized lines across the globe

³ The term “irregular migrants” refers to migrants in a country who are not entitled to reside there, either because they have never held a legal residence permit or because they have overstayed their time-limited permit. The term is contested and other terms to describe this group include “clandestine,” “unauthorized,” “undocumented,” and “unlawful” (https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/what-we-do/networks/european_migration_network/glossary_search/irregular-migrant_en).

(Bosworth et al. 2018; Garner 2018; Loyd 2015; Parmar 2018a). Immigration legislation and its enforcement divide the world's population into nationalities and "races," allowing decisions to be made about who is granted and refused entry. In this respect, immigration rules legitimize racializing practices, while appearing to be race-neutral (Garner 2018), thereby deflecting the ways in which borders activate racial animosity. Under the guise of immigration control and ideas about "maintaining the nation," the racially egregious practices and outcomes of border enforcement are rendered hidden and deniable.

Who Are "We"?

As Balibar (2010) reminds us, it is the drawing and enforcing of borders and their interpretations that create languages, races and genealogies. Hence, borders and boundary-making are emotionally and politically charged processes. Keeping others out—or marking them as different or strange—can also be interpreted as part of the bid to reinforce the imagined "us," providing shape to and definition of who "we" are. This shaping of "us" through who "we" are (or are not) occurs both at state and individual levels. Thus, countries, continents and political regimes all partake in drawing borders and enforcing them as a way of reassuring their identities, while at the same time, reasserting sovereign power. The fictive, fluid nature of nationality and citizenship are nowhere better revealed than by examining the changes in British immigration legislation (see Commonwealth Immigration Acts 1962, 1968, 1971), which ensured that darker-skinned citizens of commonwealth countries were categorized as immigrants upon arrival to the UK (Bhambra 2017). Defining who is an "immigrant" relies on its malleability as a concept and its role in (pre)occupying the imaginations of nations. As Gilroy (2004: 165) observes, "the figure of the immigrant is part of the very intellectual mechanism that holds us—as postcolonial Europeans, black and white, indeterminate and unclassifiable—hostage."

Throughout history, borders have been justified and implemented for their role in keeping undesirables out and in preventing contamination of the national body—or appearing to do so (Weber and Bowling 2008). Foreign national criminals and those deemed at risk of offending are watched most closely and treated most harshly. "Foreign national offender" is a police and Home Office term that refers to a person who is suspected of an offense and who cannot be confirmed as a British citizen (Knibbs 2016). Different standards are applied to their involvement in petty crime, rendering them vulnerable to administrative removal or deportation (Griffiths 2017). Racialized migrants are regarded as "criminal enemies" and an inherent security threat (Fekete and Webber 2010; Krasmann 2007). Correspondingly, criminal justice processes and policies have been directed increasingly toward identifying foreign nationals who are constituted as undesirable, removable and deportable. These practices are increasingly preemptive in nature and blend with existing criminal justice procedures that target visible racial minorities disproportionately (Parmar 2018a). For example, in the UK, the police have been enlisted to manage migration directly and research I have conducted on its consequences is discussed below.

Borders as Mirrors: A Conceptual Framework

Theories of representation are useful for understanding how agents that are enforcing borders interpret their work and the function of borders. Hall (1997), for example, signals to us that the world is not reflected accurately in the mirror of language. The words

and metaphors that people use to describe bordering processes are therefore significant for shaping people's views. Language operates as a representational system and is key to understanding the way in which meaning is produced; representation is the production of the meaning of the concepts in our minds through language (Hall 1997). Hall (1997) suggested three approaches to understanding representation. The "reflective approach" or "mimetic approach" describes a transparent relationship of imitation or reflection between words and things. The "intentional approach" suggests that the author or speaker imposes his or her own meaning on the world through language. The "constructivist approach" proposes that social actors use the conceptual systems of their culture and linguistic representational systems to construct meaning and communicate to others.

In employing aspects of Hall's theory, I focus on the importance of language and metaphors in what the participants in my study conveyed in relation to migration and the work that they perform. Based on my research findings and in light of the application of metaphors that are used to describe migration, I found it useful to develop a heuristic device or alternative metaphor of "borders as mirrors" in order to generate intellectual reflection about how bordering processes are as much about ourselves as they are about migrants or those perceived to be "others." The idea of "borders as mirrors" adds to the literature on critical perspectives in criminology by complementing existing scholarship that encourages us to question the socio-political function of borders and their ubiquity, as well as the role of borders in excluding and criminalizing minority ethnic groups and in maintaining racial hierarchies and regulating foreigners across the globe (Aas 2016; Lalonde 2018; Lyon 2005; Preston and Perez 2006). Furthermore, the concept of borders as mirrors contributes to a growing area within critical race studies, which theorizes the mutable, hidden and encoded nature of racism in contemporary societies: "racism is relocating both underneath and at the surface of the skin. It reproduces itself via screens and mirrors of various kinds. It is becoming both spectral and fractal" (Mbembe 2019:3).

Policing Migration in the UK

Operation Nexus (hereinafter "Nexus") was launched in 2012 as part of a bid to ensure that foreign national criminals who are eligible for removal were identified accurately and processed swiftly through the system. Nexus involves stationing immigration officers in police custody suites so that the immigration status of foreign national suspects can be checked immediately using the Home Office database. The policy also involves the identification of individuals who may be deemed a threat to the public good to be passed on to the "high harm team," which is discussed further below. Nexus was inaugurated in 2014 and has led to the removal of 3000 individuals between 2012 and 2015—a figure expected to increase following Brexit when European Union citizens will be subject to British immigration rules (Griffiths and Morgan 2017).

Methodology

From 2014 to 2017, I collected over fifty interviews with police officers, police staff, policy makers and immigration enforcement officers across the UK. I also observed police

custody spaces and shadowed immigration enforcement officers and Home Office immigration personnel. The immigration case hearings I attended took place in London and Greater London.⁴ I witnessed the various professionals (lawyers, physicians, social workers) in the police custody spaces, as well as sworn police officers, custody sergeants, custody detention officers⁵ and suspects that were “booked in” to the custody suite and detained. In total, I interviewed fifty-eight participants and conducted 230 hours of observation. I obtained informed consent from all participants and communicated that they were free to withdraw from the study at any time. All names and identifying details were anonymized and are presented as such in this article. In conducting a semi-ethnographic study with interviews, I was able to understand how the police come face-to-face with migration control enforcement, and to witness the ways in which foreign national offenders were perceived and processed through the system. The data were analyzed by typing up my fieldwork observation notes and interviews and coding them for common themes (Braun et al. 2019). I focused on the language that was used by participants in describing the work that they do and drew on Hall’s (1997) theories of intentional and constructivist representation to interpret the participants’ role and agency in meaning-making with regard to the part they played in the criminal justice and immigration enforcement systems.

The findings align according to the following themes. First, borders and boundary-making are rooted in a sense of security that connects to an imagined idea of who “we” are. These perceptions fuel (and are fueled by) cultural racism and perceived threats, which range from the impact on stretched social resources to terrorism and other criminal activity. Contemporary border work and boundary-making in this respect therefore involve inscribing who “we” are through creating culturally distant “others” and delineating who “we” are not.

Second, I found that the framing of migrants is an active process as opposed to being flatly descriptive. While this may be intuitive, it was clear that the framing acted as a device through which police and immigration agents cast judgment and expressed ambivalence toward their work in order to rationalize it. It was here that metaphors and vivid descriptions come to the fore and demonstrate why understanding *how* migrants are framed is vital for potentially transforming racialized narratives.

Third, the findings underline the racializing consequences of tasking the police with border control duties as part of the “hostile environment” in the UK. All of these findings constitute the overall conceptual-metaphorical framework used in this article, and the mirrors metaphor is based on an analysis of how the participants represent their views on migration and foreign national offenders. Based on these findings, I conceptualize borders to be like mirrors because they are multidimensional in their function and also encourage us to look at ourselves. The discussion that follows examines these themes and, in doing so,

⁴ I have omitted specific details about locations and the roles that were observed in order to preserve the anonymity of those who participated in the research. Given the sensitivity of the cases and, on occasion, witness protection requirements, providing even minor details would allow cases to be identified.

⁵ Police custody suites in England and Wales have a range of actors working within them. Police custody sergeants are the most senior police officers present and responsible for the welfare of arrested persons brought to the police station and for making overall decisions in the suites. Police officers are of varying ranks and usually present in the police station to book individuals, who are suspected of an offense, into the custody suite. Custody detention officers are not sworn police officers and are responsible for ensuring the safety of the custody suite and attending to the needs of suspects being held. These duties can include the restraint of violent suspects, providing refreshments, and making regular checks of detainees. Custody detention officers will perform many of the “booking in” duties and associated administrative tasks.

provides further foundation for the use of borders as mirrors as a heuristic device and for its focus in this article.

Borders as Mirrors

Borders as Mirrors that Deflect, Distort and Magnify Social Issues

As Bauman (2016) explains, ever-increasing securitization is pursued in the name of protecting “us” from “them” and the response has been to close borders to those in need. One of the most compelling narratives that emerged from my research was that police officers who carried out immigration checks emphasized that their role was vital to ensuring security beyond the physical border. In their terms, the police duty in immigration control had widened and magnified to include securitizing practices, as the following statement demonstrates:

We do the checks to ensure the security of everyday citizens. That is now our mandate. With multiple threats of terrorism, prolific offenders and so on all potentially in the mix, it's important to have an approach that can catch these. People are checked when they enter the country, yes, but not always... being criminal is not a static thing. It might be that you entered the UK with no record, but then a person may have started engaging in crime after being here. [Mansoor, police officer]

The focus on borders as a way of providing security from terrorism allows the wider causes of terrorism, such as disenfranchisement, foreign policy and radicalization, to be effectively muted and to deflect attention from the potentially draconian and counter-productive approaches to policing migration. Indeed, the dual crises of migration and terrorism have become the dominant political figures through which Western nation-states express their own internal crises (Nail 2016). In discussions with the police, it was this duality and possibility of a migrant being a terrorist or a terrorist being a migrant that was often presented as a justification for the work they did:

The checks are so tight on FNOs [foreign national offenders] because there's every possibility that the person could have a history of being involved in terrorist activity. It's something we cannot afford to miss. [Karen, detective inspector]

Not all refugees and migrants are truly seeking help. Some are entering the country for other reasons—not so honorable or needing help... that's what the liberal perspective doesn't seem to appreciate. [Simeon, detective chief inspector]

Internal immigration policing work was also shown to supplant a particular image of the nation—bolstering the notion of an imagined “we”—through ideas about cultural differences inherent to migrants. Notions of cultural distance among foreign national offenders were emphasized and, at times, these differences were capitalized on in order to police suspects. For example, when asked about how they decide where to focus their work, an immigration officer told me rather nonchalantly that there were some sectors where they expected to find illegal migrants:

We know that Indian restaurants are more likely to employ people without papers. It's a skill set that migrants have, language not needed, and unusual working hours. So... we target those places on particular days and times. Same for say taxi drivers

and targeting particular areas and times. My dad was a cabbie all his life, I've got nothing against the job... [Paul, immigration enforcement officer]

As the statement above illustrates, migrants were seen as culturally distant and as a collective mass rather than as individuals. People were regarded as units of cultural inscription—vehicles of cultural expression in a representative sense (Knowles 2003)—and were denied human agency, much like the water metaphors discussed above. Despite the immigration officer recognizing the continuities between his own father's occupation and that of the migrants he was often pursuing, he was nevertheless able to deny seeing the reflection of his father in those he was targeting for removal from the country. Another claimed:

You know they [migrants] just have different ideas about how people should interact. I mean there are real cultural disconnects. The other day a Nigerian Muslim male was brought in suspected of domestic violence. The neighbors called. Turns out he had no leave to remain yet had managed to marry two women at the same time since arriving. It must have slipped through the system, before everything was joined up. To him this was totally acceptable... but for us, doing that... it's totally alien... it's just not right for women to be treated like that here. [Declan, immigration officer, previously a police officer]

Cultural racism, as discussed above, has long shaped arguments justifying the need for border control (Sharma 2015). Declan's statement is illustrative of how certain anti-immigrant narratives gain traction because of preexisting stereotypes about culture, gender and religion, particularly Islam. In my findings, culture was selectively blamed for criminality and violence, and broader assumptions about cultural differences across groups were made easily when suspects were ethnic minorities and/or migrants. Anxiety about gender subordination practiced in immigrant communities can act as a proxy for xenophobia and erase the presence and complexities of other factors—including colonial legacies, politics, racism and structural and individual pathologies—that may be at play (Volpp 2011). Here stood another example of how bordering deflected from the reality of cultural racism while also reinscribing it. Connections between nationality and types of criminality have been made readily by senior-level police officers in the course of hailing the apparent success of Nexus (Rowley and Rodhouse 2013). Offending figures were regularly categorized by the suspect's nationality and discussed openly in the custody suites where I was present. While this was ostensibly a neutral practice, it also made visible the racial grammar that punctuated police and immigration work. It revealed the social practices that race gave rise to, and the practical and embodied things that race made happen (Knowles 2003). By showing the volume of offenses by country without any nuance or breakdown of the figures, the link between nationality and criminality was thus magnified, fueling cultural racism based on stereotypes of offending. This framing served to deflect the racializing practices that bordering resulted in by keeping a focus on connecting national origin and criminality rather than ethnicity and criminality—the latter of which was the subtext to the narratives of securitization that provided justification for border enforcement.

Metaphors of Meaning: Mirroring Public Perceptions

Some of the phrases used by police and immigration officers reflected common conceptualizations of migrants discussed at the beginning of this article, evoking water, overflow, deluge and corresponding difficulty of absorption, incorporation and assumed incapacity for integration. The responses applied constructionist modes of representation, where actors

adopted the conceptual systems of news and popular culture to construct meaning (Hall 1997):

We are just so swamped. The country's resources are bursting at the seams. That's what it is. So really... you know... it's not about their religion or the color of their skin. [Kathy, detective inspector]

We cannot absorb more migrants, so we need to divert those who have committed crimes before they become a bigger problem here in the UK. We do need to have limits on the types of people we take in and are essentially adopting to be part of us. [Martin, police custody sergeant]

When people see floods of migrants arriving on boats, the pictures in the papers, it's too much to comprehend. So, they react by thinking it's gonna impact them directly, like it's going to affect their culture, the economy... everything and they want us [immigration] and police to be doing something. [Sally, immigration enforcement officer]

As these statements reveal, agents responding to migration reflected the sentiments about floods and streams of people coming to the UK and the perceived difficulty in managing them. Some, like the immigration officer, were critical of the way the reports suggested an uncontrollable presence which then left officers, such as her, responsible for managing the situation and providing a semblance of order. The focus on limits and the idea that the country was at capacity promoted deflection away from the humanitarian crisis and the issue of responsibility. Other discussions showed how officers perceived their role in bordering practices as enabling the flow of people and delineating the good from the bad. Again, this chimed closely with the discussions about borders serving a regulatory function or acting as a sorting mechanism. One police officer that endorsed the idea of Nexus talked about how their function was like a "sieve." In discussing foreign national suspects, he confirmed the narrative about bordering being for security, explaining:

We have to catch people that can't just go through, can't just carry on and be put through the same track. We need to have a different channel, a different standard like for them [foreign national offenders] else the usual system [criminal justice system], that citizens go through, just gets clogged up. [Sunder, police detective inspector]

These examples and the metaphors adopted demonstrate how police and immigration officers have integrated the metaphors about migration into understanding their worlds and their work. The concepts were given meaning by the actors through the language they adopted to describe the roles they assumed (Hall 1997). Nevertheless, the dualism of their role, at times suspecting, while also responding to migrants' vulnerabilities, exposed tensions in how they rationalized their work. One police custody sergeant, for example, told me that he found it difficult when migrants were completely destitute and had nowhere else to go. "They shouldn't be here in the police station, I feel. We try our best but it's a hard environment for them to come to really" (Derrick police custody sergeant). Derrick went on to say that he knew this category of migrants had technically broken the law and would be classified as "criminal," but that he thought that it was harsh for them to be targeted by schemes such as Nexus which the police were expected to enforce. Derrick poignantly stated: "it says more about us than it does about them that we have to use a sledgehammer to crack a nut." His comment was a reminder of the self-reflection that was prompted at times for those enforcing border controls and the ethical questions that their work raised.

Policing the Hostile Environment: A Two-way Mirror?

Through its stated aim to enhance collaboration between immigration and the police, Nexus seeks to ensure that those eligible for removal are channeled through a separate route, creating a two-tiered system—one for suspected foreign national offenders and another for citizen offenders. With the police implementing Nexus, the performative aspects of bordering are arguably heightened. There were instances in which the police asked a suspect his/her nationality or for his/her passport, and the suspect responded by asking if the police were immigration officers. Against the criminal justice principle of being innocent until proven guilty, one could see how questions about nationality and citizenship status were inherently accusatory, particularly given the increasing criminalization of immigration violations in the UK (Aliverti 2013). In other instances, I saw people without secure immigration status instantly plead guilty to crimes because they thought they might be treated (more) leniently or given a reduction in their sentence because they were confronted with the police as enforcers of immigration rules and therefore assumed they would be subject to criminal justice procedures. As state agents furnished with legitimacy to use force, the “border spectacles” (De Genova 2013) created of migrant illegality were all the more compelling when carried out by the police, rendering them creative agents that make and reproduce the policy of the state as opposed to simply acting as mirrors of society (Barker 2016; Fassin 2015).

Then-Home Secretary Theresa May’s 2012 aim to create a “really hostile environment” for illegal immigrants in the UK so that they would leave the country involved multiple measures including policing that would bring about destitution for those with insecure statuses (Webber 2019). Through my fieldwork on the impact of Nexus, I saw how established day-to-day police practices intersected with immigration control duties to uphold and (re) produce racial hierarchies (Parmar 2018a). As a component of the hostile environment, Nexus police work enabled another layer of scrutiny to be applied to suspect populations, mirroring societal-level fears about racial others. In this respect, the naming of an environment as hostile for migrants—and, by implication, those perceived to be racial others—was an example of how meaning is constructed within discourse and how it worked to regulate the conduct of police and immigration agents (Hall 1997). Although Nexus’s stated aim was to target the most serious and prolific offenders, many of those ensnared in the policy were involved in petty offenses or with previous convictions (Griffiths 2017). The collateral consequences of Nexus are potentially significant as victims with insecure immigration statuses who approach the police for help are likely to be apprehensive for fear of being referred to immigration enforcement. Following the “Windrush scandal,”⁶ despite police recognition of the damage incurred by their being seen as too close to deportation authorities, Nexus has further eroded the already fraught relationship between minority ethnic communities and the police (Parmar 2018b). While the introduction of new measures,

⁶ The situation that came to be known as the “Windrush scandal,” which had been continuing for years in the UK, was brought to light in 2017 (see Gentleman 2017, 2018). During the 1960s, the British government encouraged post-World War II migration from its former colonies to rebuild the labor force. Many children arrived with their parents from the Caribbean in the 1960s on their parents’ passports. Although the Windrush generation grew up in Britain, many were not formally naturalized and so lacked citizenship documents despite having lived and worked in Britain for the last fifty years or more. Stories published by *The Guardian* documented numerous cases of Black Caribbean people who had been sent to immigration detention centers, deported to Jamaica, issued with legal threats and asked to prove their status as part of the hostile environment and the routine checks introduced as part of the Immigration Act 2016.

including a ban on officers checking the police national computer solely to see if someone has leave to remain in the UK, are welcome, the wide discretion nevertheless afforded to the police to carry out immigration checks during the course of an investigation remains, even where the person is a victim of crime (Dodd 2018).

Given the police's inclination toward profiling minority ethnic group people (Bowling et al. 2008), Nexus also enabled a means by which racialized groups were subject to heightened surveillance without their being aware. This practice—to extend the mirrors metaphor—acted like a two-way mirror where suspects were watched, monitored and tracked without knowledge of the practice, its aims or its consequences. Once identified as not having papers, digital technologies of border control were employed to transcend time and space by searching databases, categorizing people and distinguishing outsiders and insiders (Lyon 2005). They would subsequently be monitored and their biometric data scoured to identify avenues for removal proceedings to be set in train.

The case of Sammy illustrates the point. Sammy, a thirty-two-year old male, was brought into police custody under suspicion of dealing Class A drugs and the possession of prohibited firearms. Following his arrest, Sammy was identified as a Jamaican national without leave to remain in the UK. Born in Jamaica, Sammy came to the UK when he was seven years old and was raised by his aunt and uncle. Sammy had been arrested and convicted previously for assisting in a burglary and a handful of other petty theft offenses. His citizenship status was not scrutinized previously. On this occasion, however, and under the aegis of Nexus, officers refocused Sammy's case, building evidence to support his membership in a gang and viewing his previous offenses holistically (including cautions, charges dropped and those for which he was not convicted), rather than as separate spent convictions or no further action incidents. Sammy was categorized as potentially "high harm" and thus eligible for Nexus's dedicated team. (For the purposes of Operation Nexus, foreign national offenders are considered as "high harm" cases where their conduct has resulted in significant adverse impact, whether physical, emotional or financial, on other individuals or the wider community (Home Office 2017).) I saw how criminal records were repurposed under Nexus and their digitization allowed the immediate sharing of previous convictions and recent criminal justice punishment information to be accessed, in order to create a file about a person (Jacobs 2015; Lageson and Maruna 2017). Although Sammy's open case was dropped due to a lack of evidence (i.e., no firearm was found and possession with intent to supply was inconclusive) and he was released, a fresh police-led intelligence operation was launched involving his surveillance, as well as his associates and their records. Depending on the collection of sufficient information, this could potentially lead to Sammy's removal or conviction- or intelligence-led deportation (see Home Office 2017). The role of the police in the hostile environment, then, prioritized the pursuit of exclusion and efficiency at the expense of fairness and justice (Bowling and Westendra 2020). Racial disproportionalities that are embedded in the criminal justice system were magnified and capitalized upon, legitimizing the invisible surveillance of racial minorities.

Conclusion: Self-reflection?

This article has discussed how borders are multidimensional in their capacity to represent and reflect racialized anxieties and fears, as well as how they can be used to deflect attention from racialized othering and for focus to be directed instead toward immigration control as a proportionate response to protect public resources. The empirical research

presented illustrates how policies, such as Nexus that dictate how migration is policed and conducted by state actors, advance, reflect and constitute those fears. By analyzing border practices, we see how discourse and policy are translated into action, and we are reminded of the fact that police and immigration agents are interpretive actors in their own right (Cote-Boucher et al. 2014; Salter 2013). In looking at the detail of these practices and how they are tied intimately to the everyday politics of culture, migration and race, we can acknowledge the connections between the conceptual and metaphoric description of borders alongside the reality of what happens and to whom. When policing migration policies fuse together stereotypes of criminality and migrant background, they also reflect and perpetuate the racialized anxieties that have pervaded societal values, ensuring that the association between race and migration—and difference and criminality—remains entrenched firmly in everyday thinking.

As Gilroy (2004) reminds us, the racism of Europe's colonial and imperial phase preceded the appearance of migrants inside Europe, and it was racism, not cultural diversity, that transformed their arrival into a "problem." Reimagining our understanding of borders and migration as a space where racism is central is perhaps instructive, even transformative. Bordering practices are evidently a *process*—ongoing throughout time and space and affecting various generations of the same family—rather than a single event or moment in history. The Windrush scandal in the UK, as well as the empirical findings discussed in this article, further underscore this point. Recognition of the long-term effects of bordering may encourage acknowledgment of the opportunity for self-reflection prompted by a reflexive reading of borders and what they do. In other words, if borders are understood heuristically as mirrors, borders may inspire society to hold a mirror to itself and reveal its insecurities and obscurities toward those deemed to be "strangers." Given that metaphors not only represent migration but can also change the way we think about migration (Lakoff and Johnson 2003), imagining borders as mirrors may be one way of reshaping the narrative. Indeed, the ambivalence and malleability of the concept of borders and the purposes they serve may provide an opportunity for thinking about them through the lens of transformation and beyond critique in order to conceive of and establish a preferred future (Balibar 2010; Weber 2015).

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