Controlling images of immigrants in the mainstream and Black press: The discursive power of the “illegal Latino”

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Abstract

In this paper, we investigate controlling images of Latinx immigrants in the US press. Our paper expands theory within this literature in two new directions. First, we look at the controlling image of the “illegal” as well as the conventional controlling images of the immigrant described in the literature. Second, we investigate whether controlling images of Latinx immigrants remain prevalent outside of newspapers aimed at a predominantly White audience by comparing controlling images of immigrants in Atlanta’s mainstream press to the city’s Black press. We find that controlling images of immigrants are prevalent in the mainstream press but seldom appear in the Black news media. We also find that the “illegal” represents the predominant controlling image of immigrants in both. Few controlling images are explicitly gendered. We argue that the *lack* of gendering in the controlling images of immigrants may serve to dehumanize all immigrants, complicating and expanding extant research.

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Imágenes dominantes del inmigrante en la prensa convencional y afroamericana: El poder discursivo del «latino ilegal»

Resumen

En este trabajo investigamos las imágenes dominantes del inmigrante latino en la prensa estadounidense. Nuestro artículo extiende la teoría dentro de esta literatura en dos nuevas direcciones. Primero, estudiamos la imagen dominante del «ilegal» así como las imágenes dominantes convencionales del inmigrante descrito en la literatura. En segundo lugar, investigamos si las imágenes dominantes del inmigrante latino también prevalecen fuera de los periódicos dirigidos principalmente a un público blanco, comparando imágenes dominantes de los inmigrantes en la prensa convencional de Atlanta con los de la prensa afroamericana de la ciudad. Encontramos que las imágenes dominantes del inmigrante prevalecen en la prensa convencional pero pocas veces aparecen en los medios noticiosos afroamericanos. También encontramos que «el ilegal» representa la imagen dominante del inmigrante prevaleciente en ambas. Pocas imágenes dominantes explícitamente muestran un género en particular. Argumentamos que la ausencia de esta caracterización de género en las imágenes dominantes de personas inmigrantes podría servir para deshumanizar a todos los inmigrantes, lo que complica y amplía las investigaciones existentes.

Palabras claves Latino · Inmigración · Raza · Efectos mediáticos · Interseccionalidad

When 2016 presidential candidate Donald Trump promoted his immigration policy by repeatedly referring to Mexican immigrants as rapists (Scott 2015), he drew on familiar racially charged stereotypes. Trump's image of a sexually violent Latino male reinforced popular depictions of Mexicans as criminals (Chavez 2013; Scott 2015) and echoed the stereotype of the Black male rapist that was used to justify the brutal racialized violence of the Jim Crow South (Davis 1981). Neither Trump's specter of the Latino rapist nor media characterizations of the "criminal blackman" represent mere stereotypes—that is, simplified generalizations about a group (Wright and Taylor 2007). Rather, these negative depictions work as controlling images, generalizations “*created by an oppressive order to police marginalized groups and naturalize their disempowerment*” (Beauboeuf-Lafontant 2009, p. 22). These constructed images constitute an integral part of the ideological apparatus that legitimizes and maintains white privilege (Beauboeuf-Lafontant 2009; Collins 2010; Golash-Boza 2015) and are gender-specific, upholding intersecting systems of racial and gender oppression (Collins 2010; Collins and Bilge 2016).

In this paper, we investigate controlling images of immigrants in the popular press. First, we examine controlling images broadly and then focus on the controlling

image that governs perceptions of undocumented immigrants—that of the “Illegal.” Collins’s (2010) theorization of controlling images centered the experiences of Black women. This theory does not attend to legal citizenship status. Collins (2010) does, however, encourage scholars to seek points of connection between marginalized populations. This article establishes points of connection by investigating and comparing the ways in which controlling images of immigrants are constructed in the mainstream or White-normative press versus the Black press.

We investigate whether the Black press deploys controlling images of immigrants, comparing depictions of immigrants in the mainstream press and the Black press. This comparison allows us to understand the complexity of the system of racial inequality through interrogating whether, in what ways, and to what extent racial ideologies concerning immigrants remain powerful outside the dominant group (Gramsci 1957; Hall 1986). Given the concern among African Americans over economic competition with immigrants and the growing political power of Latinxs (Gay 2006),¹ it is possible that the Black press reproduces anti-immigrant and anti-Latinx controlling images of immigrants that maintain white privilege even when espousing a Black counter-hegemonic discourse that critiques racism generally (Feagin and Cobas 2008). Alternatively, given the similar histories of oppression shared by African Americans and Latinxs (Chavez 2013; Entman and Rojecki 2000; Feagin 2010; Santa Ana 2002), the Black press may eschew negative portrayals of immigrants and even work to counter the depictions in the mainstream press.

To address these possibilities, we look closely at the case of Atlanta. With its history and present as the leading urban center of the US civil rights movement (Brown-Nagin 2011), and concurrent active public discourse around African American positionality in the United States, Atlanta represents an ideal space in which to explore distinctions between White and Black public spheres. Additionally, the presence of Atlanta among “New Destination” cities for immigrants means that a significant Latinx community has developed in the space—jostling long-standing racial dynamics (Smith and Furuseth 2006). The implications for findings are far-reaching: if the Black press employs dehumanizing controlling images to diminish Latinx newcomers to the extent that mainstream articles do, this represents a significant boundary-drawing around the inheritors to the US civil rights movement.

We analyze articles on immigration from *Atlanta Journal Constitution* (AJC), representing the mainstream press, and the *Atlanta Daily World* (ADW), a historic Black press. From 2013 to 2015, we find stark differences in the prevalence and content of controlling images of immigrants in the two news sources. Controlling images of immigrants are relatively standard fare in the AJC, and work to uphold existing hierarchies with generic references to “the illegal.” These controlling images are largely absent from the ADW. Although gendered stereotypes are relatively rare

¹ We use the term “Latinx” in this article to refer to people born in Latin America, and their descendants, in the United States. We do not use “Latino” or “Latina” as a description of the people or the community because “Latinx” minimizes the binary construction of gender that these other terms reify.

in both publications, a gender hierarchy appears through the predominance of male voices as experts on immigrants of all genders, particularly in the Black press.

Our study specifically advances Collins's work regarding illegality as an axis of inequality. We argue that the *AJC*'s frequent erasure of immigrants' gender and race, but inclusion of information about their legal immigration status, serves to better dehumanize them. In contrast, we see only limited evidence for the existence of these controlling images in *ADW*, the Black press publication. This contrast is important: whereas overwhelmingly White readers are encouraged to view immigrants as nonhuman masses of illegality, Black audiences consider immigrants as people who may or may not merit inclusion in the national community. These findings illuminate the ways in which minority communities are able to find ways to support and strengthen one another as they work toward equity, while demonstrating that the realities of dehumanization are deployed against minority communities irrespective of their particular racial categorization.

Controlling images

Debate exists regarding the difference between “controlling images” and stereotypes. Collins does not explicitly explain the difference, but controlling images are socially, institutionally, and historically constructed to advance the interests of the dominant group and subordinate marginalized communities (Beauboeuf-Lafontant 2009; Collins 2010). Stereotypes are “widely held but fixed and oversimplified image(s) or idea(s) of a type of person or thing” (Oxford English Dictionary 2005), while controlling images are the repetitive stereotypes that also possess the power to influence action and policies against people of color.

Social institutions such as “schools, the news media, and government agencies constitute important sites for reproducing these controlling images” (Collins 2010). Media depictions of members of marginalized groups—in the US case, non-Whites—are part of a larger discourse that actively constructs a “White racial frame” in which the interests, experiences and perspectives of Whites are represented as normative (Feagin 2010). The welfare queen, for example, is arguably a stereotype because it is a historically generated, descriptive, and false term. What makes it a controlling image, however, is that Ronald Reagan's repeated use of the trope during his 1976 campaign deeply influenced and shaped policy regarding public assistance during his tenure as president. Simply, controlling images present the carefully calibrated system of negative stereotypes that explain why the subordination and oppression of nondominant groups is natural, inevitable and ultimately desirable for advancing the normative paradigm.

Collins (2010) complicates this understanding of White dominance, arguing that race intersects with gender. That is, it is not simply White people, but White, elite, cisgender, heterosexual men that occupy the most privileged social positions (Collins 2010). Controlling images are understood to be not only racialized, but also gendered (Collins 2010; Collins and Bilge 2016). Media framing, or the selection and presentation of particular paradigms in news reporting, is a continuous process influenced by the “ideologies, attitudes and professional norms” (Scheufele 1999,

p. 115). Framing utilizes implicit cues (the reporting frequency or the general news slant) and explicit cues (the use of direct descriptions of data) to influence public perception (Zerback et al. 2015). The controlling image may be understood as a specific type of media framing—engaging the reader in understanding complex social issues through the prism of intersecting racial and gender stereotypes that render the object powerless, unworthy of assistance, and ultimately not a fully realized human being.

Controlling images of Latinx immigrants

Non-gendered racialized depictions of immigrants have been invoked in the media—especially when referencing demographic dynamics. Existing research has noted that rising numbers of Latinx immigrants are described as “invaders” whose overwhelming presence will drain public coffers and “pollute” American culture (Santa Ana 2002; Cisneros 2008). By employing the controlling image of the demographic invader, White US citizens are made to consider the ways in which they will become outnumbered in the country and presumably rendered less powerful (Rodriguez 2007; McConnell 2011).

Depicting immigrants as nameless, faceless, and genderless bodies can further disadvantage them. Immigration advocates argue that the use of the term “illegals” is purposeful—fulfilling the need to dehumanize immigrants, to the end of promoting restrictive immigration policy (Esses et al. 2013; Merolla et al. 2013). This illegal frame, with its connotation of lawbreaker, reinforces the image of the immigrant as criminal (Aguirre et al. 2011; Santa Ana 2002). Masuoka and Junn emphasize that the “illegal immigration is publicly perceived to be Latino. ... The concepts of ‘Latino,’ ‘illegal,’ and ‘criminal’ are strongly interconnected in the American mind” (2013, p. 167). In addition to inherent unlawfulness, Latinx immigrants are also cast as bringing physical diseases (Esses et al. 2013) and violence from drug wars (Aguirre et al. 2011) to the United States.

The existing literature suggests that these various stereotypes may be understood to operate within two particularly central controlling images: the criminal (male) *bandido* and the (female) “breeder.” The long-standing evolution of the gendered *bandido* depiction of Latinx immigrants and Mexican Americans has been in circulation since after the Mexican–American War and helped secure US national dominance over subjugated groups (Mirandé 1987). Romero (2001, p. 1097) argues that, today, the *bandido* is rebranded as the dangerous illegal man whose very body represents a transgression of US laws and is thus outside the structured world of White Americans (Aguirre et al. 2011). Post-9/11, this portrayal of Latino male immigrants as violently criminal is increasingly used to justify policies that lead to Latinx immigrant policing and detention (Bohon and Parrott 2012; Hernandez 2008). These detention programs focus almost exclusively on the removal of the criminalized bodies of Latino men (Golash-Boza and Hondagneu-Sotelo 2013) in order to save the White Americans, who embody their victims (Bohon and Parrott 2012; Aguirre et al. 2011).

While the Latino male body is framed through the lens of criminality, the Latina woman is understood as fundamentally hyper-reproductive (Gutiérrez 2008; Chavez 2004). Beginning in the 1990s, when Latin American migration included substantially more women and children than had previous migration streams, strong national rhetoric centered on portraying Latina immigrant women, specifically, as “breeders,” whose child-bearing was draining the resources and changing the demographic composition of the nation (Gutiérrez 2008). For instance, California’s Proposition 187, which cut vital social services to undocumented immigrants and their children, passed largely because immigrants, racialized as Latina and gendered female, were depicted as hyper-fertile (Gutiérrez 2008). The “anchor baby” construct emerged and became the justification for policy attempts to reform birthright citizenship throughout the next decade (Chavez 2013). In this formulation, the Latina immigrant, like the imagined welfare queen, becomes an entity that threatens the nation’s coffers and must therefore be regulated and controlled (Hancock 2004).

These conclusions about the intersections among illegality, Latinx identity and criminality are largely based on samples of White survey respondents and media audiences. The few studies that compare coverage of immigration policy in the mainstream and Black press find that immigrant depictions reflect the position of each group in the racial hierarchy. These studies show that some, but not all, of the meanings associated with immigration and race differ in stories aimed at an African American audience compared with a White audience (Browne et al. 2016; Masuoka and Junn 2013). For instance, comparing how the mainstream, Black, and Spanish-language press frame the announcement by the Census Bureau that Hispanics are now the largest race/ethnic minority in the United States, Rodríguez (2007) finds that all three news sources highlight Black/Latinx competition as the dominant narrative. Yet previous research found that, whereas one-fourth of the articles in the Black press also discuss the need for Black/Latinx solidarity, the mainstream press presents almost no coverage of the solidarity theme (Browne et al. 2016).

The Black press and counter-discourse

Building on Habermas’s concept of the public sphere, Dawson (1994, 2006) argues that the Black press constructs the African American viewpoint as normative through a Black “counter-discourse” (Jacobs 1996; Vogel 2001). Directed at a largely African American readership, the Black press reflects an ideology that critiques the hegemonic discourses maintained in the mainstream press. Through this Black counter-discourse, the Black press does not simply offer news to fit its audience’s preferences and preexisting viewpoints, but functions as an important part of Black resistance to systems of racial domination (Dawson 1994; Fraser 1990).

Owned and operated by Black entrepreneurs and editors, the Black press arose in the nineteenth century when Blacks were silenced and excluded from the mainstream press, providing a space where Black elites could debate important issues (Edmondson 2005; Pride and Wilson 1997). This counter-discourse positions African Americans

predominantly as the central actors, valorizes their accomplishments, and stands in judgement of White racism (Dawson 1994; Fraser 1990; Shah and Thornton 2004).

Although the literature posits the public sphere to be a space in which the common sense regarding news is discussed and constructed, it does not presume a unified opinion on decisions to be made in response to this news—and the Black press does not differ as a public sphere. Rather, it has served as a forum for debates over salient issues, including the relationship of African Americans with other people of color (Meriwether 2002). Immigrants present a set of contradictory vantage points for African American journalists and their readership (see Nteta 2014 for a review).

African Americans may view immigrants as competitors for employment and resources (Gay 2006). This perspective would require a shared understanding of immigrants as takers who bring little benefit to either African Americans as a community or the nation as a whole. Within a Black counter-discourse, then, a competition stance could employ similar controlling images of immigrants as those found in the mainstream press. With this as the frame, arguments could be had regarding extent of the damage done by immigrants, if any, and the extent of any collective responsibility despite the alleged costs.

Alternatively, many African Americans view immigrants as allies in the struggle against racism (Masuoka and Junn 2013). This perspective would assume both the underlying humanity of immigrants and that this humanity was under attack—assumptions potentially validated by the demonstrated similarities between anti-Black and anti-Latinx racism (Lacayo 2017). This could be reflected in a counter-discourse in the Black press that rejects the negative depictions of immigrants in the mainstream press, while debating the strategic utility of an alliance. Thus, although racial depictions of immigrants as Latinx are associated with negative stereotypes among Whites (Timberlake et al. 2015), a Black/Latinx solidarity perspective in the Black press could generate positive racialized depictions of immigrants as Latinx and avoid any negative stereotypes of immigrants.

The majority research on this Black counter-discourse in the Black press has not focused on immigration, but instead has investigated issues believed to be most salient to African Americans, such as police profiling (Jacobs 1996). The few studies that look at news coverage of immigrants do not investigate controlling images, but cover broader issues pertaining to interethnic conflict or cooperation (Browne et al. 2016; Rodriguez 2007; Shah and Thornton 2004). These studies find overlap in the immigration discourse in the mainstream and Black press (Rodriguez 2007; Shah and Thornton 2004).

Thus, the literature leaves open the question of whether and how controlling images appear in news stories aimed at a Black audience compared with news stories aimed at a predominantly White audience. To make these comparisons, we conduct a comparative content analysis of how immigrants are depicted in Atlanta's *AJC* and *ADW*, two periodicals representing the Black/White world of Atlanta.

This research

In our analyses, we integrate theories of controlling images and of the Black public sphere. Our theoretical framework leads us to argue that we will find a higher prevalence of controlling images of immigrants in the *AJC* than in the *ADW*. Additionally, we anticipate that the majority of *AJC*'s articles covering immigrants will contain the controlling images posited in the literature—the criminal, the breeder, the welfare drain, the job competitor, and the illegal. When comparing the two different presses, the *ADW* may be less likely than the mainstream press to depict immigrants as criminals or breeders, given the similar tropes have been used by the White media to portray African Americans. However, the mainstream press and the Black press may be equally likely to portray immigrants as job competitors.

We argue that the content of the articles will also lead to racialized depictions of immigrants, with the majority of immigrants depicted as Latinx. In this case, the mainstream press will be more likely than the Black press to portray immigrants as Latinx. On the other hand, the Black press will be more likely than the mainstream press to explicitly include non-Latinx immigrants.

The media sample

Investigating the ways that Atlanta media specifically employs controlling images of immigrants provides a theoretical and strategic site in which to compare the mainstream and Black press. According to a recent NPR report on news media, “the city of Atlanta serves up an example of the nation’s media landscape in miniature” (Folkenflik 2010). Moreover, Atlanta offers abundant political and economic opportunity for African Americans (Bayer 1996), attracting African Americans from across the country (Pooley 2015). Atlanta not only boasts a vibrant African American middle and upper class (Ferguson 2002), but the city has also become a center of Black media production, and has been described as the new “center of Black culture” (Sverson 2011).

Currently, African Americans constitute one-third (33%) of the five million people living in the Atlanta metro area (US Census Bureau 2015). Although Whites remain the largest racial group in Atlanta, and the foreign-born population is relatively small in comparison (US Census Bureau 2015), Atlanta has experienced a 63% rise in the foreign-born population since 2000 (Migration Policy Institute 2012). The rapidly rising Latinx immigrant population in particular generates the potential for perceived threat from immigrants among Atlanta’s White and Black populations, or opportunities for Black-immigrant solidarity (Shah and Thornton 2004; Rodriguez 2007).

We examined the *AJC* to analyze the mainstream press’ application of controlling images in its electronic-text articles. The largest general circulation newspaper in the southeast, the *AJC* reports a circulation of 1.2 million “educated and

affluent” weekly readers (*AJC* 2016). This target demographic skews the readership toward a White audience: 70% of Atlanta metro residents holding a college degree or higher are White and 19% are Black (US Census Bureau 2015). In response to a reader survey conducted in 2010, the *AJC* stopped publishing editorials, “setting aside the liberal tradition established by [civil rights leader] McGill and others,” and has attempted to use the editorial pages to cover stories with local interest presented with “a balanced point of view” (Folkenflik 2010). Given this emphasis on political balance and “unbiased” reporting (Folkenflik 2010), the *AJC* provides a theoretically strategic site in which to investigate the prevalence and content of controlling images in the mainstream press.

On the other hand, we utilized the *ADW* to examine controlling images of Latinx in the Black Press. Described as “the first successful Black newspaper in the US,” the *ADW* was founded by William Alexander Scott III in 1928 (Sverdlik 2009). When Scott was murdered in 1934, his brother, Cornelius A. Scott, assumed editorship. Cornelius Scott edited the *ADW* for sixty-three years. The paper was considered conservative, reflecting the views of its editor, until it was taken over by Scott’s great niece, Alexis Scott Reeves. The paper was sold to Real Times Media in 2012, a multimedia company that describes itself as “focused on media, marketing, and entertainment expressly for urban audiences” (Real Times Media 2020).

For our study of the two news sources, we developed our sampling design to produce similar numbers of publications on immigration in the *AJC* and the *ADW* for 2013–2015, just before the 2016 US presidential election that brought the immigration conversation to a fever pitch. This time frame provides enough articles for answering our inquiries, prevents a highly covered event in a single year from skewing the results, and allows us to analyze the periodicals during periods of consistent ownership. It also provides an adequate window through which to observe variation in the depiction of immigrants depending on the audience.

Using the keywords “immigrant” and “immigration,” we randomly sampled fifty *AJC* for each year from the “news” sections of the paper ($n=150$), which include pieces written by guest writers and blogs, as well those written as news. We keep these pieces in our final sample, as they represent discourse generated by community leaders, and they parallel the types of articles published in the *ADW*. Using the same keywords, our *ADW* sample consists of 195 articles. Similar to those from the *AJC*, these articles include news reporting as well as guest columns and opinion pieces.

To code these data, we first developed a list of controlling images of Latinx immigrants, drawing on the existing literature: criminal, job competitor, breeder, welfare drain, and invader. We detail this coding schema in Table 1. We coded instances wherein the immigrant’s gender was explicitly stated. We included only controlling images that directly referenced immigrant bodies; themes associated with “immigration” or immigration policy were not coded within the controlling images framework. Controlling images that were critiqued within the article were also included. Recent research suggests that repetition of a term or an idea embeds the concept in individuals’ minds (Lakoff 2014). Although coders were also instructed to add codes for controlling images that did not appear on our list, no new codes were added.

Table 1 Operationalization of controlling images and examples

Controlling Image	Coded when	Example
Criminal	Words or photographs of crime, arrests, drugs or other criminal activities were associated with immigrants	“Illegal immigrants break the law in coming here,” “Authorities have indicted six illegal immigrants”
Welfare Drain	Tax dollars, taxes, and or public services (e.g., education, welfare, etc.) were attributed to individuals not immigration policy	“say [new laws] will help prevent illegal immigrants from straining the state’s taxpayer-funded resources, including schools, jails and hospital”
Job Competitor	Words related to work, jobs, and employment were associated with immigrants	“Protestors say immigrants accept low wages and poor working conditions”
Invader	Words or photographs related to people or crowds overpowering the border appeared	“Thousands of [them] illegally streaming from Mexico into border towns”
Breeder	Words or photographs related to “anchor babies,” families, or children of immigrants appeared	“One said she had children who were legal. She should take them with her”

This is different from coding articles according to immigrant frames. For instance, a passage of text discussing how immigration policy would affect the US economy would be considered an economic frame but would not be coded in our dataset because it does not refer to immigrant individuals

Table 2 Percent (and number) of articles with controlling images of immigrants in the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* (AJC) and the *Atlanta Daily World* (ADW), 2013–2015

	AJC	ADW	X ² , d.f
Illegal immigrant	45% (67)	6% (12)	71.65,1***
Illegally	29% (43)	8% (16)	25.25,1***
Illegal immigration	18% (27)	6% (11)	13.34,1**
Illegals	5% (7)	4% (7)	0.26,1
Illegal alien	4% (6)	2% (4)	1.16,1
<i>Any image: Illegal</i>	53% (80)	21% (42)	37.89,1***
Criminal	19% (29)	5% (10)	17.06,1***
Welfare Drain	9% (14)	2% (3)	11.00,1**
Job competitor	9% (14)	3% (6)	6.08,1*
Invader	9% (14)	3% (6)	6.07,1*
Breeder	1% (2)	1% (1)	0.66,1
<i>Any image: Criminal-Breeder</i>	39% (59)	11% (22)	37.13,1***
<i>Any: All</i>	63% (95)	23% (44)	58.58,1***
n	150	195	

% and counts (in parentheses) represent whether a controlling image appears in an article at least once. Multiple controlling images can appear in a single article

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

In addition to the controlling images of criminal, welfare drain, invader, breeder, and job competitor, we coded for the use of the term “illegal” in articles describing immigrants. We separately coded the term “illegal” to differentiate references to immigrant bodies (“illegal immigrant,” “illegal alien,” “illegals”) from references to the immigration process (“illegal immigration” and “illegally”).

At least two researchers coded each piece of data. Our inter-rater reliability coefficients were 0.74 or higher. To determine the prevalence of controlling images in the AJC and ADW, we analyze whether an article contains at least one controlling image.

The reality of controlling images

We analyze the prevalence of controlling images in the *AJC* and *ADW*, presenting these findings in Table 2. Analysis reveals two particularly striking findings. First, the majority (63%) of *AJC* articles reference at least one controlling image compared with about one-fifth of the articles the *ADW*. Second, the most common controlling image in both publications is that of the “illegal immigrant.” As Table 2 shows, over 45% of the *AJC* articles include the phrase “illegal immigrant,” compared with only 6% of the *ADW* pieces ($p < 0.001$).

We also find that the *AJC* (Table 2) is substantially more likely than the *ADW* to describe immigrants using the controlling images of criminal, welfare drain, and invader. Additionally, the two publications were not equally likely to produce the controlling image of “job competitor.” In the total sample of articles, the *AJC* contains significantly more references to immigrants as job competitors (9%) compared with the *ADW* (3%).

Overall, these results point to the complexity of race and controlling images of immigrants in the press. Whereas the controlling image of the criminal (gendered male) appears most often in the *AJC*, the controlling image most often associated with women in the existing literature—the “breeder”—is almost absent in both publications. Any controlling images of immigrants in the *ADW* are rare. But prevalence is just part of the story.

In order to gauge whether controlling images are endorsed in line with the prevalent public sphere discourse or critiqued within a Black counter-discourse, we analyze the context and the meanings surrounding the controlling images of immigrants. We did a content analysis of the most common controlling image in the *AJC*: the “illegal.” The results of this analysis reveal a complex pattern. Almost half (47%) of *AJC* articles directly refer to immigrant bodies by using the terms “illegal immigrant,” “illegals” or “illegal alien.” The descriptors “illegal immigrant” and “illegal immigration” seems to be the *AJC*’s terms of choice when discussing unauthorized immigrants, with ten of our sample of fifty *AJC* headlines containing the phrase, “illegal immigrant” in 2013. The editorial policy appears to have shifted in 2014, as the term “illegal immigrant” disappears from headlines in 2014 and 2015, although it is used in the body of many of the articles.

In contrast to the *AJC*, the term “illegal immigrant” not only appears in the *ADW* much less often but is applied primarily when political speeches are quoted (e.g., the State of the Union Address) or within a viewpoint that is being critiqued. For instance, in a *ADW* description of a Trump rally,² the headline reads, “‘White Power!’ Donald Trump’s Alabama Rally Features Folks Who Want to Shoot Illegal Immigrants.” In the article, editor Terry Shropshire observes,

² In initial analyses, we also coded for the name “Trump” or “Donald Trump.” The presence of a Trump theme in articles did not substantively change findings and are thus not presented separately in this article.

During the billionaire baron's [*sic*] Republican presidential campaign stop in this oceanside city at the University of South Alabama, some in the audience shouted racist and xenophobic language, with one person barking "white power" during Trump's speech, while another talked about putting bounties on illegal immigrants' heads. (2015a).

The headline for this article ("White Power") as well as the quote represent a Black counter-discourse that critiques racism. It is the White Trump supporters—not the immigrants—who are characterized as a "threat" and whose racial animosity is pushing them to act outside the law through "shooting" illegal immigrants or placing a "bounty" on their heads.

In both the *AJC* and the *ADW*, definitions of unauthorized immigrants solely in terms of their legal status, using the noun "illegals" or the pejorative referent "illegal alien," appear rarely. However, when these terms are used, they are all presented as views of Republican politicians or leaders of anti-immigrant groups. These references typically pair "the illegal" with additional controlling images, as these two excerpts from the *AJC* illustrate:

When you look at the polling numbers, this thing is off the charts: People do not want their jobs being given to illegals coming into the nation, said U.S. Rep. Barry Loudermilk, a freshman Republican from Cassville. (Malloy 2015).

What has happened is that illegal aliens have been given the right to claim a child tax credit, and it's so bad that one guy in Indianapolis was discovered he had claimed 20 children and 19 of them lived back in Mexico—a cost of \$29,000 a year to taxpayers, said U.S. Rep. Jack Kingston, a Republican from Savannah who is running for a U.S. Senate seat. (Stirgis 2013).

In the relatively few instances in which the terms "illegals" or "illegal aliens" appear in the *ADW*, they also are invoked through the rhetoric of members of conservative organizations. This parallels our findings for the *AJW*. However, in the case of the *ADW*, these conservative leaders are Black:

But the unregulated surge of people across our borders is problematic, unsustainable and in violation of carefully-crafted rules. ... By himself, and against the protests of congressional leaders, President Obama is giving the illegal alien community absolution for its lawbreaking. Obama's action effectively rewards the intentions of these illegals to exploit a broken immigration system and lay claim to the American way of life at the expense of its citizens and legal immigrants who obeyed our laws, said Project 21's Derryck Green, a southern California resident. (EurPublisher 2014).

Referring to unauthorized immigrants as "illegal aliens" and "lawbreakers," this quote also represents one of the few instances in which immigrants are depicted as criminals in the *ADW*. The terms "surge" further amplifies the threat as invaders in a zero-sum contest over resources ("at the expense of"). Rather than casting unauthorized immigrants as criminal "threats," however, this

discourse frames “illegal aliens” within the context of an unfair advantage for “the American way of life” within a zero-sum situation.

In contrast, the sources the *AJC* chooses to quote and publish clearly associate unauthorized immigrants with “dangerous criminals.” For instance, one story implies a connection between immigrants and Latinxs, resonating with characterizations of Latino men as threats, with county law enforcement cast as the protectors.

Cobb County Sheriff Neil Warren wrote in letters addressed to U.S. Sens. Johnny Isakson and David Perdue, ... “GALEO [Georgia Association of Latino Elected Officials] has called for law enforcement to turn a blind eye towards criminals that have illegally penetrated our borders and then perpetrated crimes against the very citizens I am sworn to protect.” (Galloway 2015).

It could be argued that the use of the phrase “illegally penetrated our borders” is an allusion to nonconsensual sexual behavior. This implicitly genders Latinx immigrants as male, and operates to characterize them as rapists. The concurrent characterization of law enforcement as “sworn to protect” the rightful citizens of the nation here works within a justified history of state violence against racialized minority groups—especially African Americans.

In other *AJC* stories depicting immigrants as criminals, the immigrant individuals are presented with some dimensionality. For instance, in one story, a Latinx immigrant, Lary Perez, reinforces the controlling image of “lawbreaker” on the one hand, but discredits the image of the “welfare drain” on the other hand:

Antonini is representing Perez in immigration court. The government has been seeking to deport Perez since he was arrested about two years ago and later convicted on a charge of driving without a license in Whitfield County. Perez came here in 1999, illegally crossing the border in El Paso to find work. ... He said he understands the concerns many people have about illegal immigrants getting paid under the table and not paying their fair share of taxes. Perez said he has paid thousands of dollars in income taxes since he arrived in the U.S. Antonini let the *AJC* see tax records that show Perez and his wife have filed joint state and federal tax returns every year since 2004, and employers have withheld federal taxes on his income. (Redmon 2013, p. 1A).

Describing the offense as “driving without a license” clarifies that the deportable offense was largely technical. This is juxtaposed against the essential crime—that of illegal border crossing—fundamentally working to present an illegal body that has not engaged in serious crime. The use of the word “illegal,” however, means the reader must understand that sometimes criminals do nothing immoral—but the criminality stands.

In the few instances in which the *ADW* invokes controlling images, immigrants are typically depicted as zero-sum competitors for resources rather than as threats to the safety of the Black readership. One of the most striking examples is reflected in an article written by a member of the Black conservative group, Project 21:

Project 21 has issued six “DataReleases” on immigration in recent weeks: Obama-backed immigration policy changes would eliminate the method by which a quarter of all African immigrants, who historically have emigrated legally, are allowed residency in the United States while millions of Latin Americans who arrived illegally are granted amnesty. Health providers along the U.S.-Mexico border are dealing with flu, tuberculosis, chicken pox, scabies and other illnesses brought into the U.S. by illegal aliens. ...The massive influx of Latin American children in 2014 in particular led the Obama Administration to rely on inferior screening processes and a resettlement strategy that dispersed them across the country. Attorney General Eric Holder told public school administrators they have an “obligation to enroll students regardless of immigration status.” This influx expands class sizes and stretches school budgets. (EurPublisher 2014).

This quote reflects a Black counter-discourse centered on African immigrants while simultaneously reproducing controlling images of Latinx immigrants. Contrasted with “lawful” and therefore “deserving” African immigrants, “illegal aliens” are described as invaders (“massive influx”) and polluters, bringing diseases across the US-Mexico border such as “flu, tuberculosis, chicken pox, scabies.” “Illegal” immigrant children are cast as a “welfare drain,” “stretching school budgets.” The specific reference to the “millions” arriving from Latin America in the quote above racializes the undeserving immigrants as Latinx, with the term “alien” emphasizing their Otherness.

However, much more typical than this negative depiction, the *ADW* articles use “immigrant” or “immigration policy” as a simple descriptor that is unattached to any controlling image:

When [attorney general nominee] Loretta Lynch ... was pressed about the president’s authority to address immigration using executive orders during her confirmation hearing, her answers were less than pleasing to Senate Republicans, who disagreed with the president’s actions. (Ingram 2015).

Consistent with the theory of a Black counter-discourse, this article focuses on the topic most relevant to the Black readership—Loretta Lynch, the first African American woman to serve as attorney general—rather than on immigration. This distinction is critical because, as the lead enforcement officer for the country, Loretta Lynch’s opinion on the matter is paramount. The article, in stating that “her answers were less pleasing” to Republican, anti-immigrant sentiment, also supports Black counter-discourse. Moreover, “immigration” in this example is neutral, without the qualifier “illegal” that is found so frequently in the *AJC*.

Race and immigrant depictions

It is within the White, mainstream press that controlling images of immigrants will uphold the US racial hierarchy through the stereotyping of immigrants as Latinx. The *AJC* articles were more likely to refer to immigrants as Latinx ($p < 0.001$) and less likely to refer to immigrants as African ($p < 0.01$). In fact, almost half (47%) of

Table 3 Percent (and number) of articles identifying gender and race/ethnicity of immigrants depicted in the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* (AJC) and the *Atlanta Daily World* (ADW), 2013–2015

	AJC	ADW	X ² , d.f
Gender			
Male	19% (29)	8% (16)	9.26,1**
Female	11% (17)	7% (13)	2.33,1
Latinx	33% (49)	15% (30)	14.34,1***
African	3% (4)	10% (19)	6.82,1**
n	150	195	

*p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001

the AJC articles racialized immigrants as Latinx, compared with only about one in ten of ADW articles. We present these results in Table 3.

Many of the AJC articles identifying immigrants as Latinx focus on the 2014–2015 influx of children from Central America trying to cross the border. For instance,

Thousands of children have been streaming across the southwest border in recent months, fleeing poverty and violence in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras. Calling it an “urgent humanitarian situation,” the Obama administration has been scrambling to care for the children. This week the White House asked Congress for \$3.7 billion in extra funding to respond to the crisis. (Redmon 2014, p. 2B).

This quote demonstrates the complexity of media coverage of immigrants. Some of the articles, such as the one above, provide a sympathetic view of the children’s situation, while simultaneously generating the specter of a physical force with terms such as “streaming” and “pouring.”

Although some ADW articles identifying immigrants as Latinx also cover the increase in the number of minors from Central American crossing the US border from 2014 to 2015, eleven of the twenty-nine ADW articles racializing immigrants as Latinx involve describing or critiquing Trump’s characterization of Mexicans as criminals or rapists: “Trump’s support skyrocketed after his inflammatory—some say racist—talk on immigration, saying that most Mexican immigrants were rapists and criminals” (Shropshire 2015b). Here, the conflation is clear. When Trump talks about Mexican immigrants, this is a statement about immigration generally. The criminalization of immigrants from Mexico is, then, an inflammation of the immigration debate broadly.

Gender and immigrant depictions

We found little explicit gendering of immigrants, and even fewer race/gender intersections (Table 2). The most common immigrant gendering appears implicitly

through the controlling image of “criminal” or “job competitor.” Few articles in the *AJC* or the *ADW* reference gender through pronouns. As the “within Latinx” gender estimates in Table 2 show, very few of these articles produce an intersection of gender with race.

However, in both publications, there is one important exception to this lack of gender/race intersections in depictions of immigrants—Trump’s implicitly gendered reference to immigrants as “Mexican” and “rapists” or criminals. For instance, a *ADW* article reports,

Controversial GOP presidential candidate Donald Trump told CNN Wednesday that he will ultimately win the Latino vote, and knocked Democratic opponent Hillary Clinton for promoting what he called an immigration policy that would “let everybody come in ... criminals, drug dealers, killers,” according to NBC News. ... During his presidential candidacy announcement, Trump called Mexican immigrants “rapists,” among other things. (Holloway 2015).

Trump’s characterization of Mexican immigrants as “rapists” does not simply gender them as male, but also as a threat to (presumably White) women (Stabile 2006). Using the term “killer” intensifies this threat. However, the *ADW* reporter undermines the persuasive power of these controlling images through a clear critique: “Trump is fooling himself if he thinks he will win the all-important Hispanic vote if he fails to issue an apology for his offensive comments” (Holloway 2015).

Seeing immigrants through racialized media

Applying controlling images theory to articles on immigration in the mainstream and Black press, our study takes up the call to racialize immigration studies through both the images we analyze and the audience to which those images are directed (Saenz and Douglas 2015). We find that the dominant (White) racial ideology expressed through controlling images remains highly salient in the mainstream press but has a limited presence in the Black press.

Our study advances Collins’s work on controlling images through revealing the prevalence of the “illegal” discourse in the mainstream press and the specificity of illegality as an axis of inequality. Whereas racialized and gendered tropes of African Americans serve to uplift the White racial frame while subjugating Black communities (Collins 2010; Feagin 2010), the *AJC*’s frequent erasure of immigrants’ gender and race serves to better stereotype and dehumanize them.

Although any single conventional controlling image of immigrants as criminals, terrorists, job stealers, breeders, welfare drains, and invaders appears in about one-tenth of the *AJC* articles, cumulatively they represent about one-third of the pieces on immigration. This creates a prevalent negative discourse on immigrants in which Trump’s characterization of Mexican immigrants as criminals and rapists is culturally legible.

We see limited evidence for a significant reach of these images into the Black press. Instead, the Black press contains very few controlling images of Latinx immigrants, and instead deploys a counter-discourse in which Black

accomplishments and issues take center stage and White racism is critiqued. Just two of the sampled *ADW* articles contain blatantly pejorative controlling images. In both the *ADW* and the *AJC*, these images appear within the rhetoric of conservative community leaders whose political position of community leaders aligns with parties on the right of the political spectrum, those most closely associated with promoting the interests of White elites.

Some scholars may argue that we find very few “controlling images” in our data, given that no more than 10% of *AJC* articles in our sample cast immigrants as one of the controlling images found in the literature. However, studies of how the media influences racial attitudes among Whites weaken these counter-arguments. In particular, it is through *subtle* racial references that negative views toward racially marginalized groups are most likely to flourish (Mendleberg 2001). The theory of unconscious bias in particular would predict that the constant pairing of the term illegal, in any form, with the term immigrant is likely to create an automatic cognitive association between these two terms in the minds of the *AJC* readers (Tetlock and Mitchell 2009). This unconscious association may operate to strengthen the racial hierarchy, particularly if White readers bring automatic assumptions that immigrants are lawbreakers to the voting booth.

This study adds to extant research in Latino studies regarding the framing of Latinxs immigrants in the media. For instance, McConnell (2011) uses Atlanta media to demonstrate that statistical measures are often employed to represent the increase of the Latinx population while ignoring the increases of other populations, which results in an inaccurate representation (McConnell 2011). These “misperceptions could help to create a widespread perception of racial and ethnic threat and, perhaps provide public support for policies that disproportionately affect” Latino immigrants (McConnell 2011, p. 191).

Our study adds to this scholarship by showcasing how the media utilizes implicit cues such as controlling images to further marginalize Latinx immigrants. Additionally, Duarte (2009) explores how students internalize stereotypes they have learned about Latinx men from popular culture. Our study complements this literature by confirming that the media constructs not just stereotypes around Latinxs in the United States but employs controlling images that work to exacerbate and narrate oppression. Findings illuminate the extent to which controlling images work to limit the US conversation around the Latinx community broadly and in other marginalized communities.

Findings carry important implications beyond the frontiers of Latino studies and for the study of other stigmatized groups targeted by restrictive immigration policy, particularly those racialized as “Muslim.” Often described with the controlling images of “terrorists” and “oppressed women,” these images reinforce the association between political violence and male-bodied foreign nationals who practice Islam—and between misogynist violence and Muslim women (Perry 2014). Our study suggests a further interrogation into the controlling image of “terrorist,” which may function similarly to that of “illegal” in dehumanization processes through the erasure of gender and race. Our work also suggests that controlling images that link Muslims and terrorists may be challenged through counter-discourses in the Black press, particularly when Muslims include African

immigrants or groups understood to be native to the United States, such as Black Muslims.

Existing literature has suggested that, especially in the US South, African Americans exist in competition with Latinx newcomers, and that this has caused significant anti-Latinx sentiment in the African American community (Marrow 2011). Findings here lend support to earlier work by Telles et al. (2011) and others, however. This work demonstrates that, although African Americans may agree with negative racialized stereotypes of other marginalized groups, they largely fail to support discriminatory policies against these groups. In the United States, there is a long-standing history of Black support for civil rights initiatives across color lines (Telles et al. 2011). This research suggests that the reality of cooperation is being reflected and amplified in the Black press through an almost-complete absence of dehumanizing controlling images—effectively ensuring audiences consider the subjects of potentially hurtful legislation as, at the very least, people.

Thus, this article demonstrates that we cannot simply apply the concept of controlling images as singular stereotypes applied against purportedly homogeneous groups. Instead, it is important to consider the audience in question, the layers of immigration status, and how gender and race sometimes are—or are not—used to uphold the racial hierarchy through the media. Simply, controlling images work to guide conversations among audience members and operate based on the common sense already achieved by this audience. Controlling images based on race, gender and immigration status are all powerful devices—not only to further disempower already marginalized groups, but to build alliances between these groups as they reject the narratives of the public sphere.

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