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Defining Immigrant Newcomers in New Destinations: Symbolic Boundaries in Williamsburg, VA

Deenesh Sohoni
William & Mary, dssoho@wm.edu

Jennifer Bickham-Mendez
jbmend@wm.edu

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Defining immigrant newcomers in new destinations: symbolic boundaries in Williamsburg, Virginia

Deenesh Sohoni and Jennifer Bickham Mendez

Abstract

This article examines media representations of immigration in Williamsburg, Virginia, a 'new immigrant destination' in the USA. Through a content analysis of coverage in Williamsburg's local newspaper, we explore how reporters, columnists and readers draw on nationally and internationally circulating discourses to produce public interpretations of immigration issues and construct symbolic boundaries between and among in-groups and 'others' in the community. 'National boundaries drawn locally' captures how media actors use nationally recognizable frames to interpret local issues and define the parameters of community and national belonging. 'Localized symbolic boundaries' take their meanings from place-based, cultural understandings, specific economic conditions and demographics in the local setting. Newspaper discussions in Williamsburg distinguish between 'deserving' foreign student workers (primarily from Eastern Europe and Asia) and 'undeserving', racialized, Latino 'others'. Our analysis advances theories of boundary construction and holds implications for the politics of belonging more generally in other immigrant-receiving contexts.

Keywords: immigration; media; symbolic boundaries; racial 'othering'.

Introduction

In recent decades, global migration patterns have changed to incorporate new nation states, cities and localities as sites of immigrant origin and destination, generating new points of social and political tension. Immigrant-receiving countries contend with conflicts stemming from the growing demand for cheap labour combined with the perceived threat that newcomers pose to social and cultural cohesion and dwindling public resources (Castles and Miller 2009).

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Attempts to reconcile these tensions are reflected in the heated political debates and the intensification of immigration control taking place in countries around the world (De Genova and Peutz 2010). Increased expressions of anti-immigrant sentiments resonate globally, embodying ways of imagining national identity that span across a range of nations (Brotherton and Kretsedemas 2008; Fassin 2011). Yet, despite their cross-national resonance, immigration controversies and tensions play out within communities, which possess their own specific histories and place-based identities.

In the USA, such tensions have increasingly registered locally in 'new immigrant destinations', as migration streams have shifted away from traditional, urban gateways to include small towns, rural areas and suburbs (Jones 2008). In many of these sites, local governments have proposed and successfully enacted, local immigration enforcement policies, justifying these measures as a response to the federal government's failure to address 'the immigration problem' (Walker and Leitner 2011).

Through making issues 'public', and giving form to people's fears and anxieties, the media plays an important role in constructing the boundaries between 'mainstream' society and immigrant 'others' that underlie such policies (Hall 1996; Korteweg and Yurdakul 2009). In the USA, contestations around these boundaries reflect the contradictory position that immigrants occupy within the national imaginary and the ambiguities contained in public discourse surrounding immigration issues (van der Veer 1995).

While most previous research on immigration issues and the media in the USA has centred analysis on outlets with national audiences (Chavez 2001; Menjívar and Kil 2002; Ono and Sloop 2002) or those in major cities (Dunaway, Branton and Abrajano 2010; McConnell 2011), current immigration patterns have rendered smaller communities important sites for understanding public interpretations of and responses to immigration issues (Varsanyi 2010). The continued prevalence of newspapers as sources of news makes them critical for exploring these processes (Padín 2005).

Our study fills an important gap in the literature by examining coverage and public reactions in a media outlet directed at one such community – a new immigrant destination that occupies a prominent position within the national imaginary of the USA. Perhaps best known as the eighteenth-century capital of one of the first British colonies in the USA, historic Williamsburg, Virginia has undergone rapid growth and development, transforming it from a small, tourist and college town into an 'upscale destination' for retirees and professionals. These changes have coincided with the arrival of immigrants from Latin America and temporary foreign workers

from Eastern Europe and Asia, drawn to the area by growing numbers of entry-level, service-sector jobs.

Through a content analysis of over 500 texts appearing in the *Virginia Gazette* – Williamsburg's local newspaper – we examine the discourses that journalists and local residents use to produce public interpretations of immigration issues. We advance understandings of symbolic boundary construction by identifying ways in which community-level imaginings draw upon nationally and internationally recognizable discourses. We identify two patterns. The first, 'national boundaries drawn locally', captures how media actors make use of nationally recognizable frames to interpret local issues and events, thereby constructing the parameters of both community and nation. The second, 'localized symbolic boundaries', produces distinctions between 'us' and 'them' in ways that draw meanings from locally specific economic conditions, demographics and cultural understandings. In Williamsburg, this latter pattern takes a distinctive shape, as journalists and readers distinguish between 'deserving' foreign student workers (primarily from Eastern Europe and Asia) and 'undeserving', racialized, Latino 'others'.

Immigration discourse: symbolic boundaries and social membership

Scholars have devoted significant attention to analysing media coverage of immigration issues and related legislation (e.g. Calavita 1996; Coutin and Chock 1997; Chavez 2001; Ono and Sloop 2002), as well as representations of Latinos in mainstream media outlets (Padín 2005; Chavez 2008; McConnell 2011). Others have focused on public officials' use of discourses in debates about immigration reform (Newton 2008) and by community residents and politicians in controversies over proposed local enforcement measures (Esbenshade et al. 2008).

Researchers note the power of the media to produce and disseminate discourses – sets of ideas, images and statements that construct ways of knowing and talking about a particular topic; and how media representations created by journalists shape knowledge about events, peoples and places in the world (Hall 1996). Media actors draw from surrounding discourses, employing culturally resonant tropes and metaphors to narrate events. But beyond this, they actively construct, adjudicate and contest meanings in order to make sense of and produce knowledge about conditions and occurrences in a particular time and place (Coutin and Chock 1997). Therefore, the media serves as a critical site of cultural and symbolic struggle where ideologies, identities, social meanings and beliefs about the world are negotiated and debated (Bourdieu 1991). Through the words and images used to cover events, the media also

plays an important role in the construction of social categories of people, and in the creation of distinctions between those who should and should not be included in the national imagined community (Chavez 2001).

Lamont and Molnár's (2002) conceptualization of social and symbolic boundaries proves useful in understanding this process. They define symbolic boundaries as conceptual distinctions drawn by social actors to categorize people into groups, which emerge through struggles over the creation of collective definitions of reality. Once they are widely agreed upon, symbolic boundaries influence and shape social boundaries – 'objectified forms of social differences manifested in unequal access to and unequal distribution of resources (material and nonmaterial) and social opportunities' (Lamont and Molnár 2002, p. 168). Localized debates about immigration are important sites for the construction of symbolic boundaries. Understanding how journalists and readers who contribute to the *Virginia Gazette* define, contest and construct them has implications for recent immigrant-receiving contexts more generally.

Local journalists and newspaper audiences encounter ways of talking about and understanding immigration issues that resonate at the national level. Widely influential narratives framed in relation to national identity often underlie public policy (Newton 2008). In the USA, nationalist narratives that depict the country as a 'nation of immigrants', extolling the exemplary characteristics and epic struggles of past immigrants (usually those hailing from Europe), coexist with nativist discourses that paint immigrants as threatening alien 'others' who erode the national culture, steal jobs, exploit public services and commit crimes (De Genova 2005).

As a 'new immigrant destination', Williamsburg presents a useful site for studying boundary-making processes as they unfold in communities undergoing economic and demographic transitions (Massey 2008; Marrow 2011). Like other recent sites of immigrant reception, Williamsburg's incorporation into new migration streams coincided with a period of rapid growth and development. Thus, debates about immigration have emerged amid broader public discussions about issues related to these changes, such as the availability of affordable housing, the loss of 'small town life' and the construction of new schools and redistricting (Dawkins et al. 2007). At the same time, Williamsburg's symbolic position within the national imaginary and its identity as the 'birthplace' of the USA adds a particular flavour to the ways in which residents derive their understandings of immigration issues. Shedding light on this process – how the *national* community is imagined *locally* – is a central aim of our study (Anderson 1983).

Background: Williamsburg, Virginia

Located on the Virginia Peninsula with an estimated population of 136,000 (US Census Bureau 2009), Greater Williamsburg[1] is home to nationally important historic sites and has been a widely recognized tourist destination since the 1950s. Tourist attractions include Colonial Williamsburg, 'the world's largest living history museum' designed to recreate eighteenth-century life in colonial Virginia; Jamestown, the first permanent European settlement; and the revolutionary battle-fields at Yorktown. In the 1970s and 1980s, visitors' attractions expanded to include popular amusement and water parks, like Busch Gardens and Water Country USA, as well as major golf courses.

As was the case for many sites across the US South, in the 1990s and early 2000s Greater Williamsburg experienced significant growth and development, transforming it from a quaint, rural town to increasingly, a 'suburb without a city' (Deeb-Sossa and Mendez 2008). The early 2000s brought a construction boom, and Williamsburg began to be marketed as an 'upscale' retirement destination, further spurring residential and commerical development. Between 2000 and 2007 the area's population increased by 15 per cent (nearly double the state average), largely driven by the influx of affluent retirees drawn to Williamsburg's historic appeal, natural beauty, lower taxes and 'quality of life' (US Census Bureau 2009). Residential and commercial development brought increasing numbers of jobs in the retail and hospitality industries as well as landscaping and grounds keeping, and construction (Dawkins et al. 2007). The plentiful low-wage jobs in these industries, particularly in the tourist season, acted as an important 'pull factor' for migrant labour.

In the 1990s, local theme parks began to recruit foreign students to fill summer jobs (Gilligan 1999). These young people, who typically hail from Eastern Europe, China and a few other Asian countries, enter the USA with J-1 Exchange Visitor visas, which allow them to work for up to three months and to travel for up to thirty days prior to the start of the programme. Hotels, grocery stores and restaurants also drew on this seasonal labour force, facilitated by contract agencies specializing in job placement, transportation and housing for student exchange workers.

The 1990s also brought a wave of immigration from Latin American countries – primarily from Mexico and Central America. Latino newcomers ranged from seasonal migrants (often with H2B visas[2]) to long-term settlers, and from those with undocumented status to those with US citizenship. While still a relatively small percentage of the total population (3.5 per cent), the local Hispanic population saw unprecedented growth between 1990 and 2007, nearly quadrupling in size from approximately 1,250 to just over 4,700 (Pew Hispanic Center 2008, 2009).[3] Health care providers, social services and schools began

to report sharp increases in Spanish-speaking, Latino patients and clients as well as students eligible for Limited English Proficiency instruction (WCHF 2008; Rita Welsh Adult Literacy Center, personal communication, 12 January 2010). As this group of culturally distinct newcomers became increasingly visible locally and as immigration surged onto the national agenda, immigration issues became the subject of heated public debate in Williamsburg.

Data and methods

We base our study on a data set comprised of news articles, letters to the editors, op-ed pieces, columns and public commentary published in the *Virginia Gazette*, the oldest, non-daily newspaper in the USA. Serving the Greater Williamsburg area, the paper is published twice a week and enjoys a paid circulation of 16,500 (*Virginia Gazette* 2010a).[4] One of its best-known sections is the 'Last Word', which features readers' anonymous contributions, grouped according to 'hottest local topics', ranging from major national and world events to local issues, like the possible threat posed to the community's songbird population by cat owners (cf. *Virginia Gazette* 2010b).[5]

We conducted a content analysis of all texts referencing immigration published in the *Virginia Gazette* in 2006 and 2007 – two pivotal years in which coverage of immigration issues and community debates about the 'immigration problem' in Williamsburg reached their apex. These local debates were spurred by publicized controversies at the national, regional and state levels. For example, in the USA, 2006 was a landmark year for the immigrant rights movement – when over the course of twelve weeks an estimated 3.7–5 million people took to the streets in over 160 cities to rally for immigrant rights (Bloemraad, Voss and Lee 2011, p. 3).

Also during this period, a number of restrictive measures that garnered extensive media attention were introduced in Northern Virginia (Walker and Leitner 2011). For example, in 2007 Prince William County passed a resolution that denied certain public benefits to those unable to prove legal permanent residency and granted authority to local police to check immigration status if there was probable cause to suspect someone of lacking legal status (Wilson, Singer and DeRenzis 2010). This resolution represented an important precursor to current immigrant enforcement laws such as SB 1070 in Arizona. State and local elections in 2007 also became platforms for debating immigration issues. Furthermore, several local crimes received media coverage, which framed them as 'immigration issues' by highlighting the undocumented status of the suspected perpetrators.

We developed an initial coding guide using a set of identified themes shown to correspond with prevalent discourses about immigration

within national- and local-level public discussions (Perea 1997; Chavez 2001; Sohoni 2006; Chavez 2008).[6] Using a sub-sample of media texts, we conducted a pilot study to refine our coding mechanism, adding and collapsing categories to incorporate themes that emerged from the data set. We then coded all 522 texts using six categories: (1) Culture; (2) Economy and Labour Market; (3) Government Responsibility; (4) Community Resources; (5) Crime/Border Enforcement; and (6) Multiple Arguments.[7]

Since many of the texts included multiple themes related to immigration, we assigned each text a primary code corresponding with an identified dominant theme and in some cases secondary codes for less prominent themes. Lengthy pieces that devoted substantial discussion to several themes (e.g. feature articles about the overall impact of immigration for the local area) were coded as Multiple Arguments. Each text was read and coded by two coders with inter-coder reliability ranging from 0.81 to 0.88.[8]

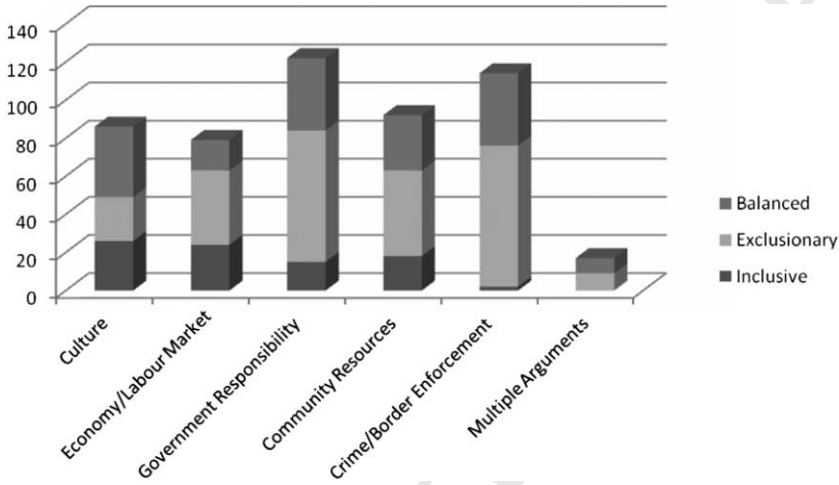
In addition to assigning thematic codes, we also classified texts by type (news article, opinion piece/column, op-ed, letter to the editor, Last Word entry), and by expressed attitudes regarding immigration issues. We classified texts as 'exclusionary' when they expressed anti-immigrant sentiments and/or support for rigorous immigration enforcement or restrictionist measures. We labelled entries 'inclusive' when they expressed sympathetic attitudes towards immigrants and/or opposition to restrictionist or strict enforcement measures. Because 'news discourse' is understood to present stories in an 'objective' manner (McElmurry 2009), we classified as 'balanced'[9] news articles and select feature columns and editorials that followed professional norms of 'objective' reporting by ostensibly telling 'both sides of the story' and representing both pro-immigrant and restrictionist/exclusionary positions.

As other scholars have noted, the categorization of discourses is a tricky business (Ono and Snoop 2002). While we recognize the risk of reifying the typologies that we develop and employ in this study, our analysis treats these classifications as heuristic devices, not as unchanging, objective phenomena. The advantage of combining a systematic content analysis with this analytical strategy lies in allowing us to probe the meanings that these discourses hold and the roles that they play in the construction of symbolic boundaries, while avoiding some of the pitfalls of discourse analyses that rely solely on subjective interpretations (cf. Adams and Roscigno 2005).

Findings

Figure 1 shows the frequency of references to immigration issues and the number of texts by expressed position within each coding category. Over half of the texts (51 per cent) expressed anti-immigrant or

Figure 1. *Coverage of immigration issues by category and attitude 2006–07*



pro-enforcement sentiments, compared to only 17 per cent that expressed more inclusive attitudes towards the immigrant population. The remaining 33 per cent, which consisted mainly of feature articles or news items, were coded as 'balanced'. In only one of the six coding categories did inclusive texts outnumber exclusionary ones – the category of Culture. The other five categories contained significantly greater numbers of exclusionary than inclusive texts (see Figure 1).

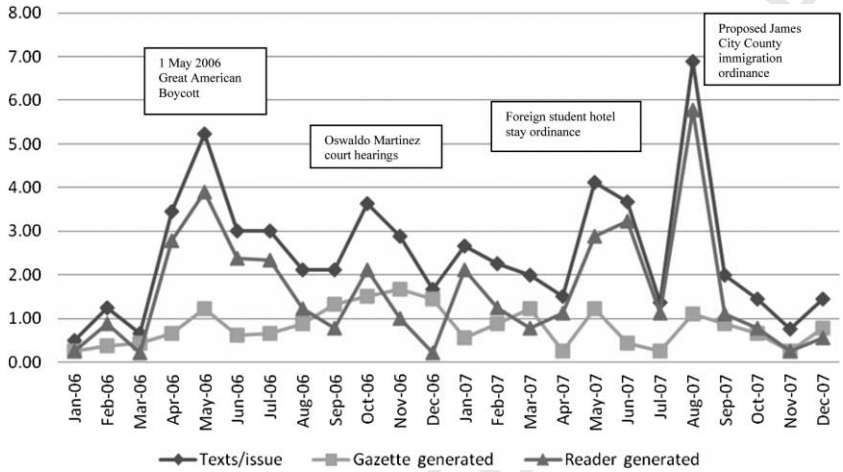
Debates about immigration published in the *Gazette* were often triggered by news coverage of local and regional events (e.g. a crime committed by an identified 'illegal' immigrant, a local election, or a proposed restrictionist measure). As seen in Figure 2, the *Gazette*'s coverage of immigration issues in 2006–07 varied greatly over time in response to these as well as national events, and spikes in public commentary followed 'up-ticks' in news coverage.

Newspaper content submitted by readers (342 letters to the editor or Last Word entries) was nearly double that of texts authored by journalists and regular columnists (177 news articles, columns and editorials).[10] It is in these texts authored by readers (often written in response to columns and editorials) that symbolic boundary construction is most evident. We identify two patterns of symbolic boundary construction revealed in discussions in the *Gazette*: (1) national boundaries drawn locally; and (2) localized symbolic boundaries.

National boundaries drawn locally

In the first pattern, media contributors 'download' largely intact narratives and discursive frameworks about immigration that resonate

Figure 2. *Media texts per issue by month, 2006–07*



nationally, and often internationally, to generate understandings about local happenings. In these instances discussions about local issues become a forum for constructing symbolic boundaries that delineate national belonging, and community-level boundaries map entirely onto national ones. For example, a reader's letter to the editor employs 'multiple' discourses to interpret local immigration issues and to construct a 'we' that defines community and national membership:

> I moved here from another area of the country where illegal immigrants were also not considered a problem – initially. That changed within a very few years. The school scores drastically declined. Homes became filled with multiple families/individuals who created noise issues. Unkempt houses caused neighboring homes to lose their value. Drugs, crime, gangs and graffiti increased dramatically .... If the illegal immigration issue is allowed to continue, we will in fact become a Third World country like those that the illegal immigrants are trying to leave. If illegal immigration is left unchecked in greater Williamsburg ... our way of life will be destroyed (Munn 15 August 2007).[11]

Local constructions of national symbolic boundaries use pre-existing discourses to frame local conditions or events. Since our coding categories are derived from themes that correspond with these discourses, we use them to organize our analysis of this pattern of boundary making in order to demonstrate how these frames were employed.

Culture. Cultural debates in the pages of the *Gazette* largely mirrored contestations and ambivalence regarding the role of immigration in nationalist constructions of 'American' identity (Chavez 2001; Honig 2001). Reflective of this ambivalence, there were nearly equal numbers of inclusive (twenty-six) and exclusionary (twenty-three) texts that made reference to immigrants and cultural issues. Readers and columnists debated if immigrants were culturally threatening or reinvigorated the cultural life of the community and nation through their embodiment of the 'American' entrepreneurial spirit. Mirroring themes in the national media, nativist depictions of Latino immigrants as 'unassimible' were prevalent (Chavez 2008). Texts in this category also made frequent reference to the USA as a land of immigrants, of immigrants' pursuit of the American dream, and other assimilation narratives central to US nationalism (De Genova 2005).

Some comments referred to the area's role in the formation of the nation, by invoking Williamsburg's colonial history (Last Word 6 May 2006, 10 May 2006). For example, a letter to the editor reflects the prevalent theme of Mexican immigrants as an invading force seeking to 'reconquer' the nation by describing them as a 'colonizing' threat to current 'natives' (Chavez 2008):

> Immigrants leave their old country fully intending to switch allegiance to the new, including history, culture and language. Colonizers . . . intend to replicate as much of the old country in the new as they can, just as did the English who came to Jamestown in 1607. (V. Watkins 8 April 2006)

However, most cultural debates about immigration coalesced around language. In a 2006 Last Word (26 April 2006) comment a reader criticizes those who 'lament the presence of hard-working Hispanic, Asian and other immigrants' and blame them for not speaking English, 'when in reality they function in two languages'. Other readers cite specific cases of encountering 'foreign' languages in Williamsburg (usually Spanish) as evidence of a threat to the cultural fabric of both the nation and community. For example, a 2006 issue printed an image of the American flag with the words 'Welcome to America, Now Speak English' next to a letter decrying the use of Spanish in the Williamsburg post office as a dangerous sign 'of a creeping loss of language and culture' (E. Watkins 3 May 2006).

Other Last Word discussions criticized local organizations for providing interpretation services and resources in Spanish, arguing that these provisions enabled immigrants to avoid assimilation (Last Word 22 April 2006). Some expressed adamant disapproval of the *Gazette*'s addition of a weekly column in Spanish (with English translation) (Last Word 19 April 2006, 16 August 2006; 23 August

2006; 22 December 2007), while others labelled these claims 'xenophobic', questioning why people were 'yowling about one measly page in the newspaper given over to our Latino community' (Last Word 26 December 2007).

Economy and labour market. Debates about immigrant workers in Williamsburg's tourist, retail and hospitality industries also featured familiar and contending national discourses – this time used to interpret local labour market conditions. For example, the tropes of immigrants 'stealing' jobs from Americans and depressing wages for the native born (Last Word 5 April 2006, 20 January 2007, 19 May 2007, 8 September 2007), versus that of immigrants as hard workers who provide for their families, performing jobs that the native born are unwilling to do (Last Word 18 February 2006, 22 August 2007, 25 August 2007) were prevalent. While there were a large number of inclusive texts that stressed the vital role of immigrants in the economy (twenty-four), these were outnumbered by texts that depicted immigrants as detrimental to the economy or as a threat to American labourers (thirty-nine). Notably, contributors to the *Gazette* who stressed immigrants' work ethic and positive contributions frequently referred specifically to foreign student workers, differentiating them from Hispanic immigrant labourers. We return to this point in a later section.

Another reoccurring frame assigned blame for the immigration 'problem' to corporations that hire immigrants at lower pay because they are only worried about 'their bottom line' (Meyer 3 May 2006) – and local employers who 'pay workers under the table' and 'never hire American workers because they are not worth $8 an hour' (Last Word 22 November 2006). This latter commentator makes a nationalist call to the Williamsburg community:

> If you need a local contractor, make sure that you ask plenty of questions first. Otherwise, you may be supporting a business that should be investigated for its hiring practices. It's time for American workers to stand up for American workers.

Government responsibility. Anti-corporate frames were often discursively linked to complaints about the failure of the federal government to control immigration, reflecting the filtering down of a populist framework for anti-immigrant positions promulgated at the national level by conservative media pundits. Both arguments support pro-enforcement positions, but in different ways. Whereas contributors who expressed anti-corporate sentiments often depicted immigrants as victims of 'big business' (e.g. Last Word 5 April 2006), texts that

criticized government officials were far more likely to blame immigrants (exclusionary texts outnumbered inclusive ones by over four to one in this category). The perceived failures of politicians and the government to 'do something' about immigration led some contributors to call for various legal reforms, including local ones (Last Word 13 May 2006, 15 July 2006).

One reader responded to a proposed county ordinance to limit eligibility for local services to those who can provide proof of authorized immigration status:

> Personally, I like the fact that James City County might be willing to take a look at this national problem . . . Since the federal government can't or won't deal with the illegal immigration problem, then let a whole bunch of counties, cities and states try their hand at it. (Warren 4 August 2007)

Another reader applauded the actions of a group of residents who repaired a section of a county road in their neighbourhood:

> Cheers to the Jolly Pond Road citizens. Isn't it amazing how quickly and cheaply things can be done when the government is not involved? Makes you wonder how fast a wall could be put in place on the Mexican border if the government would just get out of the way and let the citizens build it. (Last Word 21 July 2007)

Local elections provided a platform for public commentary linking the local 'immigration problem' to failures to regulate immigration at the national level. For instance, a restrictionist ordinance proposed by a local politician during his campaign for re-election sparked a heated debate about national and local immigration enforcement, as did the campaign materials of an incumbent Republican candidate for state office. In the latter case, a campaign mailing featured an image of two brown-skinned men climbing over a barbed-wire fence. The caption read: 'Brenda Pogge will fight to give officers the tools they need to fight illegal immigrants and the crime they bring.' One of the *Gazette*'s regular columnists reprinted the image and endorsed Pogge's candidacy: 'Here's some good news for those fed up with our open border policies . . . Brenda Pogge . . . is tough enough to make the crackdown on illegals the centerpiece of her campaign. That should be enough reason to elect her' (Johnson 19 September 2007).

Community resources. Local debates about immigrants' entitlement to public services were largely dominated by restrictionist positions with exclusionary texts outnumbering inclusive ones by over two to one (45:18). Last Word contributors frequently invoked the nativist

construction of immigrants as a 'tax burden' and drain on social services (Calavita 1996):

> If area residents are paying attention to the news in any format, they have to know that people here illegally are costing the citizens hugely .... Considering we have many unfunded expenses locally ... why is it fair or reasonable for our hard-earned dollars to go to non-citizens? We have an obligation to care for our own people first ... Williamsburg cannot be the receiver for the uneducated, sick people who somehow end up here from other countries. (Last Word 7 February 2007)

Specifically, commentators stressed the cost of immigrants' illegitimate access to 'free' health care, food stamps and in-state college tuition (Last Word 22 February 2006, 12 April 2006, 15 April 2006), as well as their drain on law enforcement and overcrowding of local jails (Last Word 22 February 2006, 1 April 2006). Like the Last Word entry cited above, contributors emphasized immigrants' presumed illegality to argue that they were undeserving of services designated for 'American taxpayers' and 'not entitled to any services or privileges ... except a one-way trip back to where they came from' (Wilderman 8 August 2007).

Crime/border enforcement. Reflective of the prevalence of criminalization of immigration at the national (Harrison and Lloyd 2011) and indeed, international level (Fassin 2011), the discourse of criminality appeared frequently across the thematic categories in our data set. With the exception of Culture, Crime/Border Enforcement was the most frequent secondary code for every category of texts in our data set. In the public discussions in the *Gazette* criminality served as a 'master frame' (Benford and Snow 2000) that enabled proponents of restrictionist positions to connect a variety of issues and claims in formulating anti-immigrant positions (Chavez 2008).

The category Crime/Border Enforcement also contained the greatest ratio of exclusionary to inclusive entries (67:2), reflecting a relatively uncontested fusing of criminalization with immigration (Esbenshade et al. 2010). Writing in support of a proposal to earmark local police funding 'to crack down on and deport illegal lawbreakers', a letter to the editor makes these links explicitly: 'Illegal equals lawbreaker, which equals alien, non-entitled squatter-scavenger' (Dowling 29 August 2007). *Gazette* readers also associated immigrants with social security and identity theft, tax evasion, gang activities, drug dealing, terrorism and even littering (Last Word 6 May 2006, 14 March 2007; Munn 15 August 2007).

The linking of undocumented immigration status with criminal activity frequently occurred in conjunction with news coverage of local

cases, such as the arrest and prosecution of Oswaldo Martínez, a deaf and mute Salvadoran man who was charged with the rape and murder of Brittany Binger, a teenage girl:

> How much have we paid for Oswaldo Martinez who is accused of raping and murdering Brittany Binger? Look around and you find illegal aliens are committing more crimes, more rapes and more murders because they don't see us enforcing our laws. More Americans die each year at the hands of illegal immigrants than are dying in war. Our politicians stand back and do nothing… It's time the politicians and judges be held… responsible for allowing Americans to be terrorized in their own country. (Last Word 22 August 2007)[12]

Regional cases also sparked coverage in the *Virginia Gazette* with columnists and readers alike citing these events to support alarmist and exclusionary positions about immigration. For example, the 2007 case of a drunk driver who caused the deaths of two teenage girls in the nearby city of Virginia Beach received national attention as well as considerable public comment in the *Gazette* when it was featured on the politically conservative *Fox News*. Political commentator Bill O'Reilly zeroed in on the immigrant driver's undocumented status and linked the crime to lenient immigration enforcement (i.e. 'sanctuary cities'), which he argued attracted illegal immigrants and criminal activity (Last Word 7 April 2007).[13]

While a few Last Word contributors lambasted O'Reilly for using the tragedy to further his own political agenda (Last Word 11 April 2007, 14 April 2007), others saw this case as holding implications for Williamsburg:

> Williamsburg is already a sanctuary for illegal aliens. If you don't believe that check out the parking lot of [name of a local apartment complex]. There are vehicles there with no city stickers because they have out-of-state plates. There are several immigrants who live in that apartment complex, and I'm sure they're not all here legally. (Last Word 18 April 2007)

Commentators in the *Virginia Gazette* also frequently employed constructions of immigrants as criminals to strengthen the urgency of their calls for local and federal government enforcement of immigration – regardless of cost. In a letter to the editor, one reader cites the increased need for such measures in light of recently passed local enforcement ordinances in other parts of Virginia:

> The illegals in Loudoun and Prince George's (sic) counties are going to need a place to go to very soon. Do you think they might get

word that James City is looking the other way? Please pay attention, elected officials: Cost is not the main issue when it comes to illegal aliens. The principal of right and wrong is the primary concern. The illegals are wrong for breaking our laws . . . This is plain and simple. (Jonkovic 11 August 2007)

AQ7

Localized symbolic boundaries: 'good' and 'bad' immigrants

The second pattern of symbolic boundary construction that we found had a particular local flavour and appeared across the five coding categories. Rather than involving a straightforward application of an intact discursive framework about immigration, local boundaries were constructed in ways that were rendered intelligible within specific local debates by incorporating place-specific, cultural understandings and identities. In Greater Williamsburg, these constructions emerged in local debates about the merits and potential threats posed by different groups of newcomers to the area. For instance, a Last Word comment compares recent immigrants to Greeks who in the 1950s 'became a mainstay of our hospitality industry' and notes that 'they are us'. The reader goes on to differentiate between recent immigrants and native-born transplants from other states: 'I admire the courage and ambition of our foreign immigrants and detest domestic, pompous people who came here to avoid real estate taxes up North and bemoan others who came from much further away . . .' (Last Word 26 April 2006).

The construction of localized symbolic boundaries was by far most prevalent in public commentary that distinguished between young people from Eastern Europe and Asia who work in the area during the tourist season (often referred to as 'foreign workers' or 'exchange visitors') and a group labelled illegal/Hispanic/Mexican 'immigrants' – or as one editorialist candidly acknowledges: 'What we have in greater Williamsburg are "good" immigrants and "bad" immigrants' (O'Donovan 21 February 2007). Media representations in the *Gazette* were far more likely to depict this first group in a positive light, often stressing 'foreign workers" contribution to the community and even characterizing them as potential victims of crimes in need of protection. When we compare entries from our data set that refer to these two groups, exclusionary texts that reference 'illegal immigrants', 'Hispanics' or 'Mexicans' outnumber inclusive ones by four to one. In contrast, of the texts referencing 'foreign workers' or 'exchange visitors', *inclusive* texts outnumber exclusionary ones by 1.6 to 1.

Local debates about housing and labour market participation served as the primary arena for the construction of localized symbolic boundaries. Contributors to the *Gazette* praise 'foreign workers' for

their strong work ethic, which they associate with true 'American-ness'. Others approvingly note that working in the USA would expose these young, temporary workers to American values of hard work and entrepreneurialism, which they could later bring back to their home countries (Last Word 12 July 2006, 7 March 2007, 1 August 2007).

News coverage described opponents of a proposed ordinance that would grant hotels permits to house temporary workers as 'invok[ing] the specter of "1,700 Hispanic men descending" on the city' (Vaughan 15 November 2006) and later objecting to the measure's use of the term 'guest workers', which was regarded as 'code for illegal immigrants from Mexico' (Vaughan 6 January 2007). A news article reporting on a town hall meeting clarifies that the permits would be designated for housing for student workers who 'in fact, . . . come primarily from Asia and Eastern Europe, with few Hispanics' (Vaughan 15 November 2006).

While the differences between young student workers and 'Hispanic' immigrants are accentuated in these debates, differences between legitimate members of the community (citizens) and young foreign workers are minimized. The same news article quotes the Vice President of the Greater Williamsburg Chamber & Tourism Alliance who uses class and age-based definitions to clearly distinguish 'exchange visitors' from undesirable 'migrant workers':

> They are not migrant workers . . . They are college students, often from families that are quite well off. We want them to have an excellent experience here, which they can go back and share with their families, many of whom have the disposable income to travel. They aren't any different from your kids or my kids. (Vaughan 15 November 2006)

In contrast, 'illegal [Hispanic or Mexican] immigrants' are depicted as a distinct and threatening group. The potential for this group to settle more permanently in Williamsburg seemed to represent the greatest perceived danger. In a letter to the editor, one Williamsburg resident contrasts the undesirability of illegal 'full-time residents' with the necessary labour of foreign exchange visitors. For this reader, making housing available to the former group '. . . means extra vehicles, girlfriends, children, and often "business activities" considered undesirable that legitimate foreign workers do not bring to our community during their seasonal work.' The letter continues: 'We don't fear legitimate foreign workers. We fear illegitimate, illegal immigrants' (Bond 6 January 2007). Here, constructions of 'deserving' immigrants are also tied to social reproduction. Youthful, 'legitimate' workers are temporary visitors who will not raise families and who are

not expected to integrate as fully fledged, adult members of the community.

The construction of 'exchange visitors' as both desirable and legitimate diverges from nationalist, assimilation myths depicted by Honig (2001) that describe immigrants as a source of 'national re-enchantment'. Media accounts in the *Gazette* depict this group as embodying 'American' characteristics, but not as settlers who will contribute to the nation's 'melting pot'. Instead, this group's official status as 'visitors' likens them to foreign exchange students or even prospective tourists. Debates about foreign workers emphasize their youthfulness, legal designation as *temporary* workers and lack of ties to the area – characterizations that correspond with their attractiveness to employers, as a tractable and eager workforce with few social reproductive needs. Meanwhile, even as the deportability of undocumented, Hispanic immigrants foments their vulnerability as a workforce, media accounts in the *Gazette* characterize them as threatening, mirroring the mass media's cultivation of a 'moral panic' that justifies the policing of social borders.

Conclusion

Prior research on media representations of immigration issues has identified a set of nationally and internationally resonant discourses. Our analysis foregrounds the importance of local media outlets as sites of cultural struggle by revealing how these and more locally derived interpretative frames are deployed to construct symbolic boundaries. Our analysis suggests two prominent ways in which public discussions draw distinctions between and among in-groups and 'others' – either by adopting available interpretative frameworks so as to simultaneously define the boundaries of community and national belonging, or through a process that takes on meaning in the local setting.

We find that in newspaper discussions in the *Virginia Gazette*, contributors draw 'national boundaries locally' by adopting ambivalent nationalist narratives about the incorporation of immigrants into US culture and society as well as anti-corporate and anti-government discourses that frame immigrants as a cost to American workers and taxpayers. In addition, local media actors use the 'master frame' of criminality to link diverse issues and discourses in constructing anti-immigrant positions. The conflation of 'immigrant' with the racialized category of 'Hispanic/Mexican illegal' bolsters alarmist claims and fuels arguments about the responsibility of federal and local governments for the enforcement of various types of borders, including social ones.

Furthermore, we demonstrate how within specific local debates media actors construct 'localized symbolic boundaries' to produce

distinctions between community members and various 'others', which take their meaning from place-based cultural understandings and specific characteristics of the locality. As contributors to the *Gazette* distinguish between groups of newcomers as threatening criminals or welcomed guests, they create locally constructed boundaries between 'us' and 'them' that diverge from national definitions of belonging. By differentiating between *legitimate* 'foreign workers' and the conflated category of 'illegal/ Hispanic/Mexican' immigrants, media representations reinforce the national narrative of the 'Latino threat' (Chavez 2008), homogenizing members of this group and cementing their status as the 'other'.

Yet, even in sympathetic portrayals of newcomers, boundary-making processes construct both groups as outsiders. As in the case of national news magazines, contributors to the *Virginia Gazette* assume a readership that is 'implicitly constructed as culturally and racially singular' (Chavez 2001, p. 294). In these newspaper discussions, immigrants are objects of public discourse, but not subjects who participate in the public sphere to give voice to and interpret their own realities.

Beyond this local case, the ways that these boundaries are constructed hold implications for the politics of belonging more generally – particularly in recent immigrant-receiving sites. Clearly, local demographics and socio-economic conditions will vary – a group of newcomers defined as 'desirable' at a particular time and place may be interpreted as a danger to the majority community in another context. As tensions around immigration continue unabated, communities promise to become increasingly important sites for forging and contesting symbolic and social boundaries. If we can understand the ways in which interpretative frameworks are adopted, applied and reconfigured in particular local settings, perhaps we can imagine ways to counter these representations and render more nuanced understandings of immigration issues that could set the stage for constructing a more inclusive society.

Notes

1. Greater Williamsburg includes the city of Williamsburg, James City County and Upper York County.
2. H2B visas provide temporary work permits for seasonal, non-agricultural employment.
3. There exist no reliable data on foreign-born versus US-born Latino/as in Greater Williamsburg, and census data almost certainly under-report the presence of undocumented immigrants. However, a 2008 University of Virginia study reported that 40 per cent of Hispanic residents in Virginia were foreign born (Cai 2008, p. 2).
4. Since not every section of the newspaper is published online, the authors and their research assistants reviewed every printed issue of the *Gazette* to identify texts that contained

keywords such as immigrant(s), immigration, 'illegals', 'aliens', foreigners, foreign workers, Mexicans and Hispanics.

5. With the exception of personal attacks, libel or comments deemed racist or bigoted, an estimated 80 per cent of contributions to the Last Word are printed (Rusty Carver, personal email communication, 20 March 2008).

6. Coding categories were drawn from the existing literature as well as from the extensive ethnographic research conducted by the second author in Williamsburg.

7. Twelve texts did not fit into these categories and were coded as 'miscellaneous'.

8. Each text was coded by one of the authors and by one of two research assistants. In cases where coders differed, the author who had not served as an original coder served as the arbitrator.

9. Despite our use of the designation 'balanced', we recognize that such representations can be employed to support anti-immigrant positions.

10. Our data included three political advertisements, which we included in the analysis but not in tallies of texts authored by readers versus newspaper staff.

11. Citations of texts from our data set are provided parenthetically.

12. Coverage by the *Gazette* on the proceedings in these cases (such as Martinez's competency to stand trial) was frequently followed by extensive reader-generated commentary.

13. This case became the subject of an infamous debate between network news analysts Geraldo Rivera and Bill O'Reilly (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FhwwbNA3hjg).

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DEENESH SOHONI is Associate Professor of Sociology at The College of William & Mary.
ADDRESS: The College of William & Mary, Department of Sociology, PO Box 8795, Williamsburg, VA 23188, USA.
Email: dssoho@wm.edu

JENNIFER BICKHAM MENDEZ is Associate Professor of Sociology at The College of William & Mary.
ADDRESS: The College of William & Mary, Department of Sociology, PO Box 8795, Williamsburg, VA 23188, USA.
Email: jbmend@wm.edu