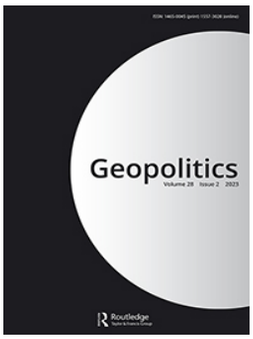

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Performing Border Externalisation: Media Deterrence Campaigns and Neoliberal Belonging

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ABSTRACT

Migration deterrence campaigns are part of a set of border externalisation strategies that extend one nation's border into other territories. Building on the literature of border externalisation, migration deterrence, and feminist media studies, we address these campaigns as critical *performative* strategies that enact neoliberal ideologies and depoliticise migration. We analyse three cases – two from the US and one from Europe – in which nations target would-be migrants with multimedia messaging to persuade them to stay home and become productive citizens in their countries of origin. We argue that these campaigns reify neoliberal notions of the moral, responsible citizen, and the criminal or bound-to-falter migrant. In particular, deterrence media embrace the paradoxical notion that migrants are responsible for making the right choice yet possess no agency. As our discussion demonstrates, strategies that discourage people from moving enact neoliberal ideologies that treat migration as a purely individual decision, decontextualised from issues of structural inequality.

Introduction

In Spring 2021, the US Embassy in Haiti tweeted a photo of US President Joe Biden, along with the following message in both Creole and English: '*Mwen ka di sa byen kle: pa vini*; I can say quite clearly, don't come over', tagging the President's account (Bojarski 2021). While it was well-known that Haitians seeking to reach the US were fleeing violence, the consequences of natural disaster, and extreme precarity, the US government's message offered no recognition of these struggles or their potential place as reasons to claim asylum. Instead, the Embassy, channelling the Biden administration, took a stand, warning would-be migrants not to approach the US border.

Media deterrence tactics like this abound globally, in particular in global North countries aiming to close their borders to arrivals from the global South (Bishop 2020; Oeppen 2016; Rodriguez 2019). While Biden's message to

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Haitians is a tight order – don't come – in general, these campaigns use visual and textual narratives about the 'dangers' of border crossing or the risks of relying on smugglers to dissuade people from departing their countries of origin. Circulated via social media, radio, text apps, billboards, and websites, among other means, media deterrence campaigns – often euphemistically termed 'information/awareness campaigns' – externalise national borders. By border externalisation, which we elaborate below, we mean technologies, policies, and practices that effectively extend national borders beyond their geopolitical limits, into other territories. IMedia deterrence campaigns constitute a critical part of border externalisation processes by rhetorically reproducing arrival country borders in countries of departure (Kaneti and Prandini Assis 2016, 315).

Scholarship focused on campaign narratives and their circulation has established the xenophobic and decontextualised nature of these messages, as well as the challenges of assessing whether they in fact 'succeed' in preventing migration. Given the complexity of migrant journeys and the fact that they include individual and collective decision-making, it is challenging to assess campaigns' impact on departures (Bishop 2020; Heller 2014; Van Dessel 2021). Even though several studies argue that they do not deter departures (cf. Fleay et al. 2016; Kaneti and Prandini Assis 2016), in this article we choose to focus on the rhetorical work campaigns perform, rather than their potential 'success'. We feel strongly that to attempt to assess that 'success' risks legitimising such campaigns and their exclusionary impulse. As we argue, the performativity of campaigns does not only serve would-be migrants. Campaigns reify ideas about migrants and citizens for host country publics, as well, serving as 'proof' that governments and border agencies are doing their job (no matter the actual effect). To that end, we claim that it is important to analyse these campaigns in rhetorical terms, where the 'effect' is the message itself: what vision of migration, rights, (il)legality, or belonging do campaigns posit? Our approach aligns with Jill Williams' call for more analysis of these campaigns in order to understand 'the full complexity of efforts to regulate transnational mobility' (Williams 2020, 1212). Critical border studies scholars agree that media deterrence campaigns participate in what can be described as the 'spectacle' of externalisation (Heller 2014, 307). In the case of media deterrence campaigns, we see this manifest in the use of visual and textual messages that reproduce these ideas.

In this article, we recognise visual deterrence campaigns as part of the performance that produces the border spectacle (De Genova 2011) that is itself crucial in externalising the border beyond its geopolitical boundaries. We argue that this process not only extends national borders, but does so in ways that propagate neoliberal ideologies, revealing border externalisation itself to be a mechanism of the neoliberal state. Our discussion is in conversation with work that recognises these campaigns as 'neoliberal tools' of the migration

management regime (Cappi and Musarò 2022). Building on the literature of border externalisation and migration deterrence, and acknowledging these processes as 'spectacular' (De Genova 2011; Hesford 2011), we analyse EU and US-based campaigns as critical *performative* strategies of neoliberal ideologies and their depoliticisation of migration. That is, borders 'function theatrically', by 'staging' state sovereignty (Franko 2021, citing Wendy Brown). We argue that in reproducing borders, deterrence campaigns function in a performative manner, staging who belongs to the nation.

By focusing on the performative nature of these campaigns, we shed light on how they construct migrant-citizen dichotomies that rely on gendered, racialised tropes. In doing so, they reify neoliberal and often contradictory notions of the moral, responsible citizen, and the criminal, errant, or bound-to-falter migrant. In addressing these processes, this article contributes to critical migration studies understandings of the entanglements of migration, neoliberalism, border externalisation, and (perceived) migrant subjectivities. We analyse three multimedia cases that speak to how these strategies operate across multiple geographies, via a range of rhetorical approaches. All three cases exemplify broader trends in deterrence campaigns, including that they do not necessarily follow a top-down approach, meaning that they should not be understood strictly in terms of government agencies addressing audiences of potential migrants or their relatives. Rather, agencies conscript audiences themselves in campaign dissemination: the recipients of these campaigns become vectors of the reinforcement and dissemination of the campaigns' messages. Our analysis also illuminates how these campaigns exemplify the contradictions that lie at the heart of border externalisation. On the one hand, border control is premised on migrants having no agency; on the other hand, these campaigns posit migrants as responsible for making the right choice: not leaving. While the material circulation of campaigns and their reception by local populations matter, this article focuses on the campaigns themselves, arguing that understanding how they perform the border and ideas of who belongs on either side is crucial for understanding the processes of border externalisation as both material and ideological phenomenon.

In addition, analysis of deterrence campaigns illustrates how border externalisation has enabled an expansion of the oppressive mechanisms that people on the move experience. In particular, our discussion advances understandings of how neoliberal bordering mechanisms such as these media deterrence campaigns reify global North borders as racial borders (cf. Achiume 2022). We use North/South labels, while recognising their inadequacy, to indicate historically entrenched disparities across former colonies and colonising powers that, while importantly not homogeneous, enable recognition of white supremacy as a material and discursive formation that acts as a productive political force, and that finds one of its expressions in current configurations of bordering practices that get performed through deterrence campaigns

(Pulido 2000; Toshkov 2018). Unpacking these campaigns' rhetorical operations can elucidate how the contradictory, neoliberal logics on which they rely work in other sites where migrants are dehumanised.

In what follows, we first introduce the concepts of border externalisation and neoliberalism as they relate to border control and migration deterrence. We then present our methodology, where we apply approaches from feminist media studies and narrative studies to analyse three campaigns from the last decade that, as a set, reflect key rhetorical strategies implemented in deterrence campaigns in the global North: *Say No to the Coyote*, a 2022 US campaign targeting Mexican and Central American audiences, uses posters meant to be shared on social media. The 2014 *Dangers* campaign directed at youth migration from Central America uses fictionalised narratives. Finally, in the EU context, the *Aware Migrants* campaign (IOM/Italy, launched in 2016) includes an online archive of testimonial videos aimed at African audiences. Our comparative study then considers these campaigns thematically. We show that they evince how neoliberalism has permeated border management by perpetuating contradictory ideas, including by portraying migrants as victims and yet expecting them to make the 'right' choice by not leaving their countries of origin. We conclude that neoliberal representations of migrants tend to depoliticise the migration apparatus by placing responsibility on individual migrants, rather than the system.

Note on terminology: In taking up campaign rhetoric, and drawing on feminist understandings of language as itself a source and site of the production of power, we refer to people crossing borders with language that does not presume a particular legal status, except when explicitly relevant, i.e. in discussing legal distinctions between refugees and other categories (cf. Paynter 2022b). To that end, we refer to the subjects of the campaigns we discuss as migrants, border crossers, and people in transit. In doing so, we seek to avoid reproducing the gaze of the state (Hamlin 2021) and to recognise migrants as not simply acted upon, but as social and political actors whose movements reflect longer histories and complex decision-making.

Neoliberalism, Bordering Mechanisms, and Deterrence Campaigns

In the year 2022, more than 46 million people became or remained displaced from their homes across international borders (UNHCR 2023) – a count that does not include the number of people in any given moment who may be considering departure for a range of reasons, including to flee conflict, persecution, natural disaster, or extreme precarity. The movements and decision-making of migrants and potential migrants elucidate how borders operate beyond their construction as geopolitical boundaries between nation-states. Here, following critical border studies scholarship, we understand borders as an assemblage of different moving parts that constitute a whole. These

'bordering mechanisms' (Yuval-Davis, Wemyss, and Cassidy 2019) are formed by a collection of practices – route surveillance, confinement, outsourcing the management of detention centres, and so on – combined with dehumanising discourses that recast migrants as 'undesirable' and are enacted by states, political actors, and private corporations. Bordering mechanisms enable border externalisation, a set of technologies, processes, and practices that effectively push the border out from geopolitical boundaries (Riva 2023) – for instance, exercising 'remote control' over populations (Zolberg 2003). This ensemble of material and discursive bordering mechanisms makes migrant journeys ever more arduous.

We understand border externalisation as a neoliberal practice aligned with a free-market ideology that is supported by policies and practices including privatisation, deregulation, flexibility, elimination of tariffs, fiscal austerity, etcetera (Harvey 2007). Two key aspects of this alignment inform border externalisation. The first is *structural/economic*: namely, the rise of neoliberalism with the retreat of the state and its institutions in the provision of services has meant the privatisation of public goods, including as private corporations come to fill the vacuum left by public institutions (Pyles 2009). As neoliberalism has also reached the migration apparatus, governments have outsourced border externalisation measures not only to other nations, but to private companies (Infantino 2021; Pacciardi and Berndtsson 2022; Riva and Routon 2020). Visa processing, private detention centres, transfer of migrants, and so on, have all been privatised. This privatisation of sovereignty has not diminished state power but rather has allowed for the state's tentacles to reach further from its physical territorial borders. In the specific context of deterrence campaigns, these are generally funded by national border agencies, enlisting the collaboration of both military agencies (e.g. *Dangers*, designed by the US Military-funded Defense Video and Imagery Distribution Systems; see Kaneti and Prandini Assis 2016) and private corporations, including design firms, and international bodies such as the IOM. Indeed, as Julien Brachet observes, the IOM operates as an 'institutional lever' for governments, helping them 'implement, abroad, migration policies that might be challenged by their own citizens' (Brachet 2016, 275; see also de Jong and Dannecker 2017; Cappi and Musarò 2022).

Second, and our main focus here: border externalisation practices enact neoliberal *ideologies* and in doing so (re)configure understandings of migration and of migrant subjectivities. The imagined ideal neoliberal citizen is a responsible person capable of self-governance, who manages choices and risk responsibly (Rose 2000), and has a (heteronuclear) family (Whyte 2017). In the context of border regimes, the rhetoric employed in deterrence campaigns reflects a focus on individuality that assumes that everyone is responsible for their own fate. Values such as freedom, entrepreneurship, consumption, individualism, and

meritocracy are attached to neoliberal ideology (Oliva, Pérez-Latorre, and Besalú 2018). In particular, 'choice' and 'personal responsibility' are two primary tenets of neoliberalism that connect subjectivities with an economic vision (Duggan 2003, 12). This emphasis on the responsibility of individual citizens tends to individualise problems rather than focus on their systemic nature. Media deterrence campaigns exemplify these dynamics.

In line with other recent studies, we recognise these campaigns as part of border externalisation measures (hence our use of 'deterrence' as opposed to the 'information' or 'awareness' labels sometimes used). With the post-Cold War securitisation of immigration, these campaigns have come to accompany the weaponisation of the border. In the Australian context, Josh Watkins (2017) shows how, through the circulation of narratives about the dangers of crossing borders and of smugglers, anti-immigration campaigns target potential migrants. Watkins argues that Australian campaigns frame unauthorised migration as dangerous, a financially irresponsible waste of time, and destined to fail. Similarly, Jill Williams (2020) explores the gendered use of guilt and responsibility discourses launched in campaigns by US border enforcement agencies. She argues that through tales of rape, kidnapping and death these campaigns mobilise fear, anxiety, and potential guilt to further US border enforcement objectives. In related work in the context of EU campaigns in Africa, Ida Marie Savio Vammen addresses the affective dimensions of 'everyday borderwork', demonstrating how deterrence strategies operate through 'the circulation of emotions' (Vammen 2022, 1412).

Deterrence campaigns are neoliberal because they assume people on the move act on a discrete, defined set of options about whether to leave their country of origin or remain there. Premised on the idea that these campaigns are tools to be given to migrants to make the 'right decision', they address migration as a matter of distinct, individual choice, rather than consider border crossing within a web of shifting circumstances and decisions, shaped by multiple and changing legal and social systems, environmental factors, and individual and community needs. By centring individual choice rather than systemic structures, migration deterrence campaigns have a depoliticising nature, meaning that they decontextualise, dehistoricise and disconnect people who cross borders from the structural, social, and political aspects of migration.

Migration deterrence campaigns aim to affect migrant decision-making through the strategic circulation of targeted messages. These campaigns are strategically produced as humanitarian and not explicitly connected to political goals to 'invisibilise their geopolitical aims' (Williams 2020, 1211). They are based on the premise that migrants do not have enough or accurate information to migrate and once they get this information they will choose

to stay put (Carling and Hernández-Carretero 2011). The recipient of the campaign is thus assumed to be a rational decision-maker.

Unlike apprehension, detention, and pushback practices, deterrence campaigns' rhetorical function may appear harmless at first glance, as evidenced by how often they have been termed 'soft tools' to distinguish them from the physical practices ('hard tools') implemented at checkpoints, with walls, in patrols and surveillance, etc (Van Dessel 2021; Williams 2020). In fact, media deterrence campaigns often utilise the same images used in humanitarian campaigns to support and assist migrants, and to persuade elected officials to do away with deadly policies (cf. Heller 2014). For this reason, media deterrence campaigns themselves have potentially significant consequences and should not be understood as less problematic than other bordering mechanisms simply because they operate via rhetorical means. Among other things, these campaigns fail to communicate information about people's rights (Carling and Hernández-Carretero 2011). Moreover, through visual rhetoric and in their modes of circulation, they construct and perform problematic notions of the migrant and of migration.

Methods

As academics, especially as women in academia, we are encouraged to write single-authored publications to advance our careers. Co-authoring is usually discouraged pre-tenure. However, we have decided to engage in the feminist praxis of writing together to, among other things, fight the loneliness of academic spaces where the neoliberal pressures to constantly produce new knowledge feel better in companionship (Campbell et al. forthcoming). We believe that the process of co-writing, as opposed to the ambiguous term 'coauthorship', is a feminist praxis because it emphasises dialogue and shared labour, disrupting the idea of the lone (white, male) academic; emphasises reflexivity; promotes multiple perspectives and experiences; and enables solidarity, accountability, commitment, and generative dialogues (El Kotni, Dixon, and Miranda 2020). Although this article is not ethnographic, our insights are informed by our academic and on-the-ground experience as ethnographers in the migration field.

As feminist scholars and friends who have collaborated in the past (Paynter and Riva 2020), we saw that our work had some overlaps that needed further exploration. While Paynter studies precarious migration, migrant reception, and the (post)coloniality of border regimes, and Riva is concerned with neoliberalism, humanitarianism, migrant confinement and borders, this article followed conversations where we discussed the rhetorical and material impact of migration campaigns and together recognised the need to bring a feminist approach to the analysis of these campaigns, engaging them on their own terms as visual performativity. Here, we attend to how three deterrence

campaigns reproduce gendered, racialised notions of migrant deservingness, via problematic construals of the dynamics of power and agency in migration contexts. By putting these campaigns in conversation, we show how both conventional representations and more innovative uses of testimony still reify the same tropes. Our analysis engages feminist media studies (Hegde 2016; Lynes et al. 2020) and builds on scholarship that recognises deterrence campaigns as not simply content circulated to various audiences, but as messaging that itself contributes to the construction of migration regimes, as well as to the production and circulation of 'representations of migrant bodies' (Kosnick 2014) in ways that concern not direct, informational messaging, but, as we argue, the reproduction of the border beyond the bounds of the nation. To this end, we analyse how campaigns both visually and narratively represent migrants and other actors involved (e.g. smugglers).

We consider questions of narrative framing (Entman 1993), recognising how IOM and state-funded deterrence campaigns design their flyers and videos to suggest which aspects of a migrant journey are salient and what their significance is. In bringing an intersectional lens to an analysis of visual and narrative aspects of state-sponsored and state-authored media about migration, we consider how these representations of migration and messages directed at potential migrants perpetuate gendered, racialised conceptualisations of border crossing that map directly onto the ideologies of exclusion that shape contemporary global North border spaces (cf. Molina-Guzmán and Cacho 2014). While deterrence campaigns are a common strategy across the globe, here we focus on North-South campaigns, that is, the implementation of media deterrence campaigns by global North countries that aim to close their borders to people from the global South.[1]

The campaigns we analyse in the following section reflect the range of rhetorical strategies used by global North deterrence campaigns in the age of social media, as well as, fairly consistently, a sophisticated understanding of the factors affecting migrants' decision-making. In addition, the post-2010 period has seen more intense adoption of campaigns in the Australian and EU contexts (Cappi and Musarò 2022, 174, citing Alison Mountz), and the US has continued to roll out deterrence media. With this in mind, and centring on campaigns produced for online circulation, we focus on *Aware Migrants*, implemented beginning in 2016 by the Italian Ministry of the Interior in collaboration with IOM and directed at African migrants; and two US-funded campaigns directed at migrants in Mexico and Central America: *Say No to the Coyote*, launched in 2022; and *Dangers*, from 2014. We address campaigns developed in US and European contexts for two purposes: first, where previous studies of deterrence campaigns have focused on individual nations or projects, by discussing campaigns from two regions, we aim to illustrate how these campaigns reflect a more widespread neoliberal logic pervading migration governance in the global North. In addition, we aim to

contribute to the need for more studies on deterrence campaigns produced beyond the EU context, in particular given Raffaella Pagogna and Patrick Sakdapolrak's observation in a recent systematic review that fewer studies examine how US authorities implement related strategies (Pagogna and Sakdapolrak 2021, 4).

Like other recent deterrence campaigns (e.g. US campaigns *No más cruces en la frontera* [No more crossings at the border] and *Nuestra Patria, Nuestro Futuro* [Our country, our future]; Australian campaigns *Don't be fooled by people smugglers* and *You will be turned back*; the Dutch/IOM campaign *Migrants as Messengers*), the campaigns we discuss highlight the use of visual and verbal stories to deter migration, and variety within this broader strategy, including the use of fictionalised and testimonial accounts. All three campaigns also reflect how neoliberal bordering strategies operate over time and across different administrations. Of particular note, these campaigns also illustrate messaging that targets broad groups of migrants (*Aware Migrants*, directed at Africans in general, and *Say No to the Coyote*, addressing migrants as the US pandemic-era Title 42 policy came to an end), as well as specific categories of migration (unaccompanied minors in *Dangers*). Our cases also span periods marked by a tightening of borders in general (in the US, across both the Obama and Biden administrations) and the increasing criminalisation of migration in Europe, along with the rise of far-right political leaders in Italy following the 2016 launch of *Aware Migrants*. While our selection is not necessarily representative of all such campaigns, a close analysis of their visual rhetoric speaks to the multiple ways in which state authorities, border agencies, and collaboration corporations and organisations are employing these strategies to externalise borders.

Deterring Migrants Through Media Campaigns: Three Cases

Say No to the Coyote

Like most deterrence campaigns, the two US-funded campaigns that we discuss employ stories of migrants' experiences when crossing the border. These campaigns focus on individual migrant journeys, often through fictionalised accounts that evoke an empathy that make people identify with the subjects of photos and videos. These stories and images are usually generic, voiced in a first-person 'I' or 'we' that in its anonymity and lack of specificity gestures to broader collective experience.

The *Say No to the Coyote* campaign was launched by Customs and Border Protection (CBP) in (2022). It consists in a set of posters that depict migrants testifying to being swindled or assaulted along their journeys, or their relatives condemning that same violence, with slogans that blame the *coyotes* (smugglers) who coordinate their travel. 'The coyote scammed us', says one poster.

'The coyote took our son from us', says another. Along the bottom of all posters reads the phrase: 'Entering the US illegally is a crime. Say no to the coyote'. Thus, the posters appeal to potential migrants through yet another instance of contradictory logic: the coyotes are to blame, but now that you have read this poster and know crossing the border is illegal, you have no excuse to work with the coyote or attempt to reach the US.

This campaign exemplifies how deterrence strategies do not simply concern the circulation of ideas but rely on migrants' bodies both symbolically and materially. For example, *Say No to the Coyote* illustrates how government-sponsored deterrence campaigns rely on gendered narratives of migration that position women in relation to extremes of victimhood and danger. One of the campaign posters shows two women, one pregnant and one holding a child, standing behind a Border Patrol truck with a CBP agent. Bold red text reads: 'The coyote lied to us'. The poster evokes the women as simultaneously criminals – they are being interrogated by an agent of the state – and vulnerable victims. They have committed a crime, yet it is not their fault but that of the coyote.

These posters underscore popular notions of female migrants as subjects of concern. On the one hand, US publics see them as unwanted 'bad' mothers; on the other hand, their potential for having (non-white) babies is feared and exploited by anti-immigration rhetoric (Lugo-Lugo and Bloodsworth-Lugo 2014; Swenson 2015). This discourse, reiterated in the image of the pregnant migrant stopped by CBP agents, claims that female migrants of colour, especially Latinas, have too many children, are too young to be mothers, or are simply unfit for motherhood. Similarly, the dehumanising 'anchor-baby' narrative that is often deployed in the US context claims that undocumented women use their babies to obtain citizenship and other 'unearned' benefits. The reproductive capacity of migrant women is a cause of fear, as the ability to form a family and have children is connected to images of invasion of the nation. However, gendered constructions of what being a man or being a woman means, enable female migrants to simultaneously be understood as victims. Women, in opposition to men, are viewed as fragile, submissive, and vulnerable (Amores, Arcila-Calderón, and González-De-Garay 2020). The same image that causes fear of invasion – pregnancy — can also evoke feelings of compassion/pity. These paradoxical notions – women as threatening and vulnerable – are directly related to the contradictory logics that uphold border externalisation as a neoliberal practice. In addition, as Jill Williams and Kate Coddington point out, the use of images of the family in deterrence campaigns also mobilises affect – in particular 'familial pain' – related to notions of the heteronormative family, implicitly tying the family unit to the future of the country (Williams and Coddington 2023).

These logics also shape how campaigns circulate. In line with other works (Cappi and Musarò 2022; Kaneti and Prandini Assis 2016), we recognise

campaign design – both its message and its intended reach – as representative of state attempts to curb migrant arrivals by performing and extending the border via neoliberal notions of the migrant as an individual decision maker. CBP describes their efforts as protecting migrants by providing them with information that should prevent them from falling victim to smugglers' lies (CBP Launches Digital Ad Campaign 2022). Through Department of State and Department of Homeland Security funding, they circulate messages from their *Say No to the Coyote* campaign (in Honduras and Guatemala), as is typical in deterrence campaigns more broadly, via radio and media ads in countries of origin and transit and through press conferences. In this case, the media aspect is especially important because the ads are designed to be circulated not only through official channels, but also among migrant networks. In fact, CBP aims for migrants and their relatives to share the flyers through text apps and social media. This notion exploits the fact that people on the move regularly share advice, warnings, strategies, and rumors about the journey ahead through informal networks of this kind (Escamilla García 2022, 77; Newell, Gomez, and Guajardo 2016). In this way, CBP relies on individual migrants to extend the US border. Unknowingly or unwittingly, would-be migrants and their families and support networks become vectors for the shifting border, complicit in deterrence strategies that produce the US border beyond its geopolitical position, via personal technology devices. Reflecting the observation by Luke Temple et al. that neoliberal narratives 'cast people predominantly as *agents of the market*', CBP deterrence campaigns enlist migrants as agents of their externalisation strategies – which themselves enact free market principles (Temple et al. 2016, 559). Deterrence campaigns that (re)produce the border through migrants' bodies and media networks also mark an important contrast with migrants' own activist uses of media (see e.g. Hegde 2016 on DREAM activists).

(Re)producing the border through the bodies of people in transit reifies the notion that migration is an individual decision, and that potential migrants and those already in transit continue to confront their movement towards the US border as a stark set of options: staying or leaving. This strategy exemplifies how 'the border apparatus itself is moving in a cellular and networked manner across sites to track and discipline non-normative bodies' (Hegde 2016, 49).

Dangers

Nearly a decade earlier, in 2014, CBP launched a set of media deterrence strategies described by the agency as addressing specific migration trends. One of them was the *Dangers* campaign. Focused on increased arrivals by unaccompanied minors, this campaign also more broadly exemplifies a decades-long project of rendering migration dangerous, and then using those dangers to dissuade people from leaving home. It includes two 60-

second videos that emphasise the risks of the journey through cuts meant to shock viewers. One video, '*La Carta*' [the letter], follows a seemingly relatable narrative involving correspondence between nephew and uncle about the nephew's decision to move North. The video opens with the nephew writing to his uncle. As the uncle opens the letter, we hear the nephew in voiceover: 'My mom keeps telling me to think carefully about my decision to head North'. A sombre violin melody suggests the emotional connection between the two men and the gravity of the nephew's words. He then lists all the dangers his mother mentions: 'the *maras* are in the trains; people from the Cartels kidnap migrants; it is necessary to walk for days in the desert . . . ' He then goes on to say: 'Maybe [all that is true], but no pain, no gain!' and the audience understands that he is sharing with his uncle his decision to leave. Close-ups of the nephew's face show him pensive, gazing up at the sun, seemingly reflecting on his decision. The camera cuts to the uncle reading the note, his expression serious. In another shot, his mother (we presume) makes the sign of the cross over his chest. We hear the nephew saying, 'I can picture myself in the United States making tons of money while my mother is here without anything to worry about'. The camera then cuts to the landscape we presume the nephew must traverse: expanses of earth cracked dry under a blistering sun. 'Thank you, uncle, I'll see you soon', we hear — and the camera abruptly cuts to another close-up of the nephew's face, eyes wide open, this time lying stretched out on the dirt, dead. A woman's voice gives a warning: don't trust coyotes.

A second video features a dialogue between two characters whom we see only as silhouettes, as if a puppet show. On the right, we see a boyish figure wearing a baseball cap. It is hard to determine whether the silhouette represents a young child or someone older. The boyish figure, a potential migrant whom we refer to as 'young man', speaks with an older man (judging by voice and stature) whose silhouette morphs into the shape of a coyote, then back to his human form again. The coyote moves from friendly to impatient, suddenly speaking with anger as he tries to persuade the young man to pay him. 'Do I look like a fool to you?' he threatens. The potential migrant then becomes submissive as the two negotiate his situation. The coyote goes on to tell him, 'Be calm, you will be there in a couple of days'. However, the young man is not totally convinced and asks, 'What about the legal documentation [los papeles]?' The coyote first tells him that he will get his papers once he reaches his destination but the young man is still hesitant and asks, 'What if anything goes wrong?'. The coyote gets angry and responds, 'If anything goes wrong, it's your fault!' Then he aggressively grabs the money from the migrant's hands. 'Children are our future', the voiceover states at the end, 'we must protect them'. At the end of both videos, a woman's voice gives a warning: don't trust coyotes.

The *Dangers* campaign was framed as a response to increases in unaccompanied minors arriving to the border with Mexico – in fact, a more than 75% increase from 2013 (U.S. Customs and Border Protection 2015; Williams 2020). As CBP explained, the campaign aimed 'to warn families about the dangers encountered by unaccompanied minors who attempt to travel from Central America to the U.S., and to counter misperceptions that smugglers may be disseminating about immigration benefits in the United States' (U.S. Customs and Border Protection 2014). Similarly, the Obama White House described *Dangers* as: 'an aggressive Spanish language outreach effort and an urgent call to action to community groups, that reaches out to parents and relatives of migrants in the U.S. and communities in Central America [. . .] to save and protect the lives of migrant children attempting to cross the southwest border' followed by a plea to Congress for more funding (Kerlikowske 2014). The campaign included the 60-second public service announcement videos, 174 media interviews, as well as 6,700 radio and TV spots, which aired in Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador, and which featured in press conferences in several US border towns and large cities.

According to these campaigns, protecting unaccompanied minors means convincing young people not to leave their home countries by allegedly warning them that they are likely to be swindled and might even die if they embark on a journey to *el norte*. This rhetoric operates in part through guilt, suggesting that parents – mothers specifically – should know better than to allow their children to emigrate, and implying they should feel guilty if and when something terrible happens to their child (Williams and Coddington 2023, 210). Messaging about guilt also relies on the virtual absence of the state in these materials. Additionally, as Marina Kaneti and Mariana Prandini Assis argue, the campaign does not contain 'explicit references to state of sovereignty [. . .] such as fences, checkpoints, border patrol agents' (Kaneti and Prandini Assis 2016, 299). The desert killed this young man because he *decided* to migrate, and thus the state has no responsibility in his death. Migration thus becomes the 'reckless decision of persons who refuse to be aware of their own limitations' (306). As the state is nowhere to be found in the messages delivered by the campaigns, it cannot be seen as responsible – or held accountable – for the fate of those who decide to migrate. Instead, parents are to blame, via a rhetoric that leaves migration prevention relegated to the sphere of the private (311).

Moreover, the very notion that the only solution to the risk of violence is to *not* migrate depoliticises youth migration, which is itself a fraught category. As media deterrence campaigns use minors to reproduce the border beyond the nation, they also reinforce this depoliticised figure through ambiguous portrayals of 'the child'. In addressing the migration of unaccompanied minors, the message that 'children are the future' seems to centre children's well-being. However, the videos' protagonists are more ambivalent figures than this

phrase would suggest. Rather than clearly portray young teens on the move, both videos feature a 'young man' whose ambiguous age means he may well be perceived as a young adult, rather than a child. The campaigns thus avoid portraying unaccompanied minors as sympathetic children and instead use the ambiguous young man figure to instil in the viewer certain notions of danger, or at least not pure innocence. In this way, they typify shifting and ambiguous representations of youth migrants in broader media and political debates, which alternately refer to migrants as 'scared and helpless victims', 'innocent children', or 'dangerous MS-13 gang members' (Galli 2023, 5; see also Hesford 2021, x). The campaign's focus on 'child safety' exemplifies the shift in 'advanced neoliberalism' by which 'rights have been replaced by humanitarianism and social security with state security' (Grewal 2017, 13).

These two US campaigns reflect conventional approaches to deterrence; in their focus on individual narratives and their use of fictionalised accounts, they provoke both empathy and fear in viewers. The more recent of the two also reflects shifting externalisation strategies, in its use of migrant bodies as vessels for the campaign. We now turn to EU-based campaign *Aware Migrants*, which incorporates migrants' stories in what we claim is a sophisticated use of personal testimony.

Aware Migrants

Aware Migrants is a campaign sponsored by IOM and the Italian Ministry of the Interior in 2016 (with German support from 2018).[2] This campaign uses visual media to make the case to African would-be migrants that attempting to reach Europe is not worth the risk. Similar to other web-based, testimony-centred deterrence campaigns such as the Dutch-IOM collaboration *Migrants as Messengers* launched in 2017, these videos are readily sampled and shared via social media or personal messages. On the website that houses *Aware Migrants* materials (copyrighted in 2018 and credited to Horace, an Italian communications agency), short multimedia narratives highlight the atrocities and physical and legal risks of the journey to dissuade people from attempting to cross the sea to Italy. The website includes a news section that reports on deaths at sea and other horrific stories, a media section with spots, music, and a short film, and a section called 'alternatives' with suggestions about finding work in one's home country. As Pierluigi Musarò describes at more length, these materials 'normal-[ise] a transnational imaginary into a militarised borderscape comprising places of violence and death, exploitation and detention' (Musarò 2019, 637).

Here, we focus on the uses of personal testimony to construct this borderscape as part of neoliberal externalisation processes. The bulk of materials on the website are individual testimonial videos, with a significant number representing stories by people who talk about regretting their decision to attempt to reach Europe. A version of what Julia Van Dessel calls

a 'spectacle of migrant victimisation', these testimonials emphasise physical risk, including death and abuse en route (Van Dessel 2021, 12). In contrast with campaigns that portray migrants as 'anonymous masses' with no voice (Bishop 2020, 1107), the potential power of *Aware Migrants* comes from its individualisation of the stories (Van Dessel 2021, 13). To this end, *Aware Migrants* exemplifies the IOM's use of testimony more broadly as an explicitly affective rhetorical strategy that upholds notions of the productive citizen or the (un)deserving migrant (de Jong and Dannecker 2017). Here, the campaign represents what Vammen terms 'affective borderwork' as it helps construct EU borders within African countries through affective appeals that emerge via individual testimony, gendered representations of mobility, and the omission of broader political context (Vammen 2022).

The targeted audience appears quite broad: given video subjects and languages, these media are directed primarily at potential migrants in West, Central, and North Africa. While the website does not explicitly state campaign goals, the overwhelming and unanimous message conveyed across the site is 'don't come' or, as Senegalese musical artist Coumba Gawlo sings in the music video featured on the main page, '*bul sank sa bakana bi*: don't risk your life'. This affective appeal helps construct the campaign's overall narrative of Africa-Europe migration as a matter of personal assessments of individual risk, rather than journeys shaped by longer histories of mobility, community networks, and iterative decision-making processes influenced by European policies and practices. In addition to pointing out the violence of border-crossing, nine African singers promote what Antoine Pécoud has called 'the culture of immobility' (Pécoud 2012, 49). 'Stay in Africa', sings Senegalese artist Fatou Guéwel. 'Let's work together! We can do a lot of things!' The song also offers a vague promise of the future: '[if you stay] one day everything can change'. Exactly how that change might happen is not clear.

Personal testimonies form a key component of the campaign and convey the idea that people who attempt to reach Europe have either committed a terrible error in judgement or did not have enough information to make a better choice. We see this as a site of contradiction: while this campaign focuses on migrants' decisions to leave, it simultaneously erases their agency. Uses of personal testimony by migrants and their relatives aim to produce empathy in potential migrants for the narrator, with whom they may relate, and they lend a layer of credibility to broad statements from government and media sources about the dangers of the journey, as people who have attempted the journey validate these claims based on their own experience. For example, the *Testimonies in Italy* section features migrant narrators describing the horrors of crossing, and most videos include opening and closing citations of the number of deaths at sea. Of his struggles in Libya en route to Europe, Mohammed says Libya 'is a new life. Of death. If God gets you out of there, okay, it's all about luck. If you die, also, it's only your problem'. These short

testimonials about sexual violence, torture, and enslavement on route, frame migration wholly in terms of individual choice, as if those on screen could have simply decided not to leave home in the first place. That these testimonies are offered by people now living in Italy seems almost irrelevant. We hear about the trauma of the journey but not about their lives in Italy, or the challenges and opportunities they have encountered since reaching Europe.

Similarly, in the section *Stories along the Route*, 18 videos focus on the trauma that narrators experienced in Libya as a reason not to leave home but fail to incorporate any backstories concerning why people moved. Max, from Liberia, says, 'If you don't pay money [to your captors], they either make you a slave, or they sell you to people who have money, to be labour for them'. Eseta, from Ivory Coast, describes being spat on for being Black and talks about being imprisoned together with a woman who suffered a miscarriage and had no medical aid. Many of the videos end with the narrator thanking God for the chance to return home.

The section *Talking with Migrants' Families* features testimonials by mothers, sisters, and wives from Tunisia and elsewhere, whose fathers, brothers, or husbands died in crossing or who have reached Italy but continue to struggle to find work and stay healthy. While men's testimonies are framed around individual quests with projects that take them outside the family, women's testimonies revolve around relatives, portraying their lives as always embedded in family networks. Implicitly underscoring notions of the heteronormative family, the testimonies featured in these videos also associate (dependent) women with extreme vulnerability. 'I lost the taste of life', says one woman (in the 'Salha' video). In another video, a woman named Salamatou, whose nationality does not appear, describes that while travelling with her young daughter to Libya, men sexually assaulted her daughter and planned to sell her for prostitution. 'My daughter is traumatised for life', Salamatou says, 'I have ruined her future. If I hadn't left, none of this would have happened. My advice for other women is: take a lesson from me. It is not good. We are putting our children's lives in danger'. While sexual violence is a documented risk along these journeys, these gendered narratives seek to persuade women to stay home by reminding them of their role as caregivers and emphasising their place within these familial networks, rather than striking out on their own – a man's work. In addition, despite that gender-based violence has increasingly gained recognition as cause for asylum, globally and in the EU (Jakulevičienė and Biekša 2022), *Aware Migrants* uses personal testimonies to emphasise the 'mother's' societal/familial role, rather than educating women on the move about the rights to which they should have access.

Personal testimony is a powerful genre because it combines both the (potentially) empathic view of the witness with associations of testimony with evidence or proof. While testimonies are often celebrated in scholarship

as subversive or as anti-propaganda, they can also be co-opted by organisations and authorities who reframe them to serve other purposes (Jolly 2014, 5). Witnessing is 'part of an economy of affect', and media campaigns use testimonials to 'align audiences' with speakers and influence how audiences perceive the person bearing witness and the circumstances from which they speak (Hesford 2011, 57; see also de Jong and Dannecker 2017; Paynter 2022a). Similarly to US campaigns, *Aware Migrants* relies on migrants' bodies both symbolically and materially to deter future migrants from leaving. In deterrence campaigns that use media to externalise national borders, a mix of individual testimony and anonymity or generalisability are key to constructing a credible, relatable narrative – a kind of personal narrative that serves the neoliberal focus on individual choice, yet remains broad enough to apply to many people. The viewer knows the speaker's name and face and has an immediate personal connection to the story. However, these narratives do not offer any context such as personal background, information about why they decided to leave, or what happened to them after filming. They also 'delegitimize those who continue to leave' despite the risks portrayed in the videos (Van Dessel 2021, 2). Rather than using these videos to denounce unlawful imprisonment, enslavement, torture, and other human rights violations these narrators mention, or to encourage Italy and the EU to cancel their agreements with Libya and facilitate safe passage for these migrants, this campaign instead narratively and visually orients understandings of migration around individual experience, choice, and decision-making, encouraging potential migrant viewers to practice stasis.

Aware Migrants also illustrates the explicit alignment of media deterrence campaigns with physical structures that externalise borders. The 1–2 minute *Stories along the Route* videos appear to have been filmed at an IOM transit station in Niger in 2018, where migrants liberated from Libyan camps or apprehended at sea and returned to Libya obtain assistance returning to their home countries (cf. Van Dessel 2019). As deterrence campaigns are produced by the IOM, in collaboration with (in this case) the Italian government, within IOM-managed camps that themselves render Niger a 'transit state' (Frowd 2020, 346), they reveal border externalisation to be a process that is both structural and mediated.

Discussion

These three campaigns exemplify the contradictions through which media deterrence campaigns operate as they are implemented through multiple visual rhetorical approaches, across the global North. First, migrants are portrayed as having no agency, yet their cross-border movements are explained as decisions – often errors in judgement. The US campaigns portray migrants as victims of swindling coyotes, or of the (desert) environment, while

at the same time, stark 'say no' language suggests that potential migrants can, in fact, simply decide to stay put, all framed around illegality or criminality. In *Aware Migrants*, personal testimonies bolster the idea that individual migrants are opting to move and could equally opt to stay home. Here deterrence functions by positing migration as an individual act and one choice among multiple potential options – upholding a 'neoliberal narrative' that emphasises individuals' responsibility and productivity while 'stripping away their social or political needs' (Temple et al. 2016, 559).

Second, campaign materials make no reference to people's actual needs for protection. We read this as implicitly building into the campaign the assumption that potential migrants are not 'real refugees', that is, that questions of asylum or humanitarian protection should not factor into any 'decisions' they make about where to live. These campaigns assume that everyone who leaves their country is an economic migrant whose decision to migrate is based on 'trivial' reasons. The precarious, fragile, unstable, and sometimes even violent conditions that prompt people to flee their homes are not addressed in deterrence campaigns but rather the focus is on migrants making individually the responsible choice. The reliance on individual factors is neoliberal, focusing for instance on a migrant's (ir) responsible decision to leave, rather than the structural issues that force people to leave or, as Vammen points out, on actual local alternatives that might help them improve their situations (Vammen 2022, 1420).

Third, individual (*Aware Migrants*) and fictionalised (*Dangers*; *Say No to the Coyote*) testimonials bear witness to migration experiences in ways that uphold notions of the ideal neoliberal citizen, despite that these campaigns are premised on the assumption that Africans or Central Americans could never be European or US citizens. Migration is consistently portrayed as a mistake, a regrettable act, and therefore also the fault of individuals (though due to violence they encounter en route). To be an upstanding citizen, therefore, is to not attempt the journey but rather to stay put in one's own country and make it 'better' (Vammen 2022, 1424). As Fatou Guéwel sings in the song for *Aware Migrants*, 'Stay in Africa! Let's work together! We can do a lot of things!' In all three cases, in aiming these materials at potential migrants in the global South, border agencies use the bodies and voices of migrants as conduits of global North national borders (note that in the case of *Aware Migrants*, all the dangers they encounter in their journeys take place far away from the EU). That is, these campaigns attempt to draw a clear line: EU and US borders begin as soon as a person leaves their home country, however far that may actually be.

Putting these campaigns in conversation illuminates how border externalisation practices amplify the power of national borders – by extending them – and in doing so, also reify discriminatory, racialised, and gendered notions of belonging. Across regions, both of the more recent campaigns (*Say No to the Coyote* and *Aware Migrants*) demonstrate a trend towards using individual migrants themselves for disseminating the campaign and externalising the

border. In doing so, these cases exemplify how deterrence campaigns do not just talk *to* audiences of potential migrants/relatives, but enlist migrants into the circulation and even production of these campaigns – therefore also implicitly enlisting potential migrants and their networks in the (re)production of discriminatory notions of belonging. As deterrence campaigns externalise borders by constructing migrant 'others', they also attempt to assuage 'the nation's insecurities about its own changing demographic and racial composition' (Hegde 2016, 40). Differently racialised 'information campaigns' illustrate these dynamics. For example, if we compare these campaigns to those launched for (white) Ukrainian refugees in 2022 in any European country (see for instance the Spanish government's information campaign for Ukrainian refugees: https://ucraniaurgente.inclusion.gob.es/campanas1), we can see how the latter are informative, providing information and legal, social and economic resources, rather than convincing people to stay put.

Conclusion

We have argued that border externalisation should be understood as a violent process that relies on and reproduces neoliberal ideologies, as exemplified in media deterrence campaigns. Not only do campaigns aim to discourage potential migrants from attempting to reach the US or the EU; but they also bolster a rhetoric of deterrence that reinforces exclusionary, racialised, and gendered notions of belonging. In this sense, it is important to underscore that *Aware Migrants, Dangers*, and *Say No to the Coyote* are not unique; rather, they speak to broader trends in deterrence across the global North, including multimedia campaigns in Australia (in the form of posters and graphic novels); online testimony-based campaigns initiated in the EU, like *Migrants as Messengers*, initially produced by the Netherlands and marketed as a peer-to-peer format; and additional deterrence campaigns produced by US agencies (e.g. *Nuestra Patria, Nuestro Futuro*). Of particular note is how recent campaigns exploit social media and personal technology, emerging in forms readymade for linking, reposting, and sharing via message. By performing the border through visual rhetoric, and by enlisting migrants and potential migrants themselves in their circulation, media deterrence campaigns extend national borders well beyond their geopolitical boundaries, constructing migrants simultaneously as undesirable in global North destination countries and as embodying neoliberal notions of the productive citizen.

As we have shown, media deterrence is not just about the realm of the symbolic, and campaigns should not be understood as less problematic or drastic simply because they operate via rhetorical means. In fact, our discussion centres the premise that rhetorics have material consequences because the construction of these ideas reflects and shapes the public recognition and treatment of migrants. Building on this

understanding, future studies might consider the circulation of deterrence campaigns among host country officials and publics, where these messages reiterate xenophobic ideas about who belongs in the country, and where, as Ceri Oeppen has noted, they meet 'the need of policymakers to be seen to be doing something' (Oeppen 2016, 57).

Similarly to Reagan-era drug war campaigns in the US (Marez 2004), the illegalisation of migration has supported an externalisation industry comprised of border agents, the producers of surveillance technology, and media companies. Accompanying this economic shift, neoliberal migration governance also affects subjectivities by measuring all human activity in terms of potential market value (Brown 2017). Neoliberalism has permeated every sphere of our society (Duggan 2003), affecting materially and symbolically lives and understandings of refuge and people who cross borders – often resulting in the punishment, criminalisation, detention and confinement of migrants (Riva 2017; Riva and Hoffstaedter 2021). These campaigns are neoliberal because they centre the 'problem' on the individual (the migrant) rather than the system (borders), in this way depoliticising migration and reinforcing the idea that borders protect the citizenry.

Because these campaigns urge migrants to stay home as good citizens, while at the same time ignoring the violence and extreme precarity prompting people to flee, they also implicitly remove human rights concerns and asylum processes from discourses about citizenship and belonging. In other words, as these campaigns externalise borders, they also rewrite ideas of what citizenship and belonging entail: not efforts to mediate structural issues, persecution, or violence, but instead 'doing one's part' through a very narrow view of responsibility that links the individual to their nation, rather than to forms of collective well-being that take shape outside the national frame.

Notes

1. Deterrence campaigns also circulate in South-South contexts, where Northern countries nevertheless exert control over border control strategies and migration messaging (Pécoud 2018), and where the IOM plays a significant role (see e.g. the Safe Journey campaign in Zimbabwe).
2. While outside the scope of this paper, it is important to mention that the IOM has a longer history of operating in ways that promote EU border policy, and specifically, a history of collaborating with the Italian Ministry of the Interior on border/migration projects in Libya and Niger (Brachet 2016, 276). With that in mind, although the IOM frequently posits its role as primarily humanitarian, we can recognise the organisation's role here as supporting the EU's (specifically Italy's) neoliberal migration governance approach. For more extensive discussion, see Brachet (2016).

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