

RESEARCH ARTICLE

‘This is not who we are’: Gendered bordering practices, ontological insecurity, and lines of continuity under the Trump presidency[†]

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Abstract

The Trump presidency ushered in a heightened sense of ontological insecurity in the US, based on a national self-narrative that portrayed an emasculated America. Trump promised to return the US to primacy by pursuing policies and practices that focused on border protection, militarisation, and the vilification of external others, while amplifying racial tensions within the country. From caging immigrant children at the border, to an enabling of white supremacy and the Capitol riots, Trump’s presidency was broadly seen as aberration in the self-narrative of America as a tolerant, democratic nation. In this article, I am interested in how gendered bordering practices inform ontological (in)security in Trump’s narrative of the nation, domestic and external policy, and discourses. While Trump’s electoral loss to Biden in 2020 has been described as a ‘return to normal’, this article instead considers how Trump’s presidency exhibited lines of continuity when examined through a gender lens. Understanding how masculinism informs ideas of ontological security reveals how notions of gendered bordering, hierarchy, and ordering have been persistent threads in US politics, rather than simply an anomaly under Trump. This suggests greater potential to read ontological security in more complex terms through gendered bordering practices.

Keywords: Ontological Security; Gender; Bordering; Trump; Gender; Security/War Studies

Introduction

With the election of Joe Biden as the 46th President of the United States, a refrain of America returning to ‘normal’ or its ‘true self’ has populated the speeches and discourses of Democrats and media alike. A common exhortation in response to Trump’s populism, policies, and leadership was that ‘this is not who we are’.¹ From caging children at the border, to an enabling of white supremacy and the culmination of the Capitol riots, it was broadly claimed that Trump

[†]The online version of this article has been updated since original publication. A notice detailing the change has been published at <https://doi.org/10.1017/S026021052100067X>.

¹Alexi McCammond, ‘Biden condemns Proud Boys: “Cease and desist”’, *Axios* (2020), available at: <https://www.axios.com/biden-denounces-proud-boys-cease-and-desist-4738e584-53f7-43ab-a6ef-0563f985a612.html> accessed 30 May 2021; Jacob Greber, ‘Is this who we are, asks Joe Biden, as he lashes out at Trump’, *Financial Review* (2020), available at: <https://www.afr.com/world/north-america/is-this-who-we-are-asks-joe-biden-as-he-lashes-out-at-trump-20200603-p54yxi> accessed 30 May 2021; Molly Nagel, ‘“Dreamers” should immediately be made citizens in immigration plan: Biden’, *ABC News* (2019), available at: <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/biden-dreamers-made-citizens-immigration-plan/story?id=63908038> accessed 31 May 2021.

represented an aberration in the self-narrative of America as a tolerant, democratic nation. In his victory speech, Biden promised to unify the nation, and importantly, ‘restore the soul of America’.²

The battle over the national self-narrative that has characterised the US political landscape under the Trump presidency has been broadly painted as an existential crisis where ‘America’ is no longer recognisable as itself.³ Psychologists in the US reported increased levels of politically-related anxiety before and after the election of Trump (dubbed ‘Trump anxiety disorder’ – although not an official disorder).⁴ In the American Psychological Association’s report ‘Stress in America: Coping with Change’, 57 per cent of Americans regarded the political climate as stressful, with Democrats overly represented in response to the outcome of the 2016 election (72 per cent compared to 26 per cent of Republicans).⁵ This crisis of self can be understood through the lens of ontological security. Ontological security is concerned with the security of the self and how actors seek security through a consistent self-narrative.⁶ The narrative that Trump promulgated was the story of an America in decline, enfeebled by internal and external enemies that wrought ‘carnage’ on the nation’s standing and its people, weakening the nation and its prosperity. In his inaugural address, Trump claimed that power would be transferred to ‘the forgotten men and women of our country’, marking an end to ‘the establishment’ who benefited at the expense of ‘the people’. America, in his view, was broken because it outsourced its industry and military to other nations, making America weak, poor, and exposed to disorder from crime, drugs, and immigration. Trump promised to ‘protect our borders from the ravages of other countries ... Protection will lead to great prosperity and strength.’⁷ References to borders and bordering practices littered the address and would be the method by which to restore order by putting ‘America First’ to ‘Make America Great Again’. These bordering practices were material, as in building the border wall with Mexico and reasserting US primacy internationally. It would also be ideational, in terms of who belongs to the nation and who does not – a ‘bordering of identities and selfness’.⁸

In this article, I am interested in how gender operates across ideas of ontological security and bordering practices in Trump’s domestic and external policy. Ontological security studies has engaged with gender perspectives, both empirically and conceptually,⁹ but few have done so

²Transcript of President-elect Joe Biden’s victory speech’, *Associated Press* (2020), available at: {<https://apnews.com/article/election-2020-joe-biden-religion-technology-race-and-ethnicity-2b961c70bc72c2516046bffd378e95de>} accessed 4 June 2021.

³John Sides, Michael Tesler, and Lynn Vavreck, *Identity Crisis: The 2016 Presidential Campaign and the Battle for the Meaning of America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019).

⁴Emily Zogbi, ‘Therapists coin new term: Trump Anxiety Disorder’, *Newsweek* (2018), available at: {<https://www.newsweek.com/therapists-report-rise-anxiety-trump-was-elected-1046687>} accessed 11 October 2018; John C. Markowitz, ‘Anxiety in the age of Trump’, *Comprehensive Psychiatry*, 74:A3 (2017), available at: {[https://doi.org/10.1016/S0010-440X\(17\)30125-6](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0010-440X(17)30125-6)}.

⁵American Psychological Association, ‘Many Americans Stressed about Future of our Nation, New APA Stress in America Survey Reveals’ (2017), available at: {<http://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/2017/02/stressed-nation.aspx>} accessed 12 October 2018.

⁶Jennifer Mitzen, ‘Ontological security in world politics: State identity and the security dilemma’, *European Journal of International Relations*, 12:3 (2006), pp. 341–70; Catarina Kinnvall, ‘Globalization and religious nationalism: Self, identity, and the search for ontological security’, *Political Psychology*, 25:5 (2004), pp. 741–67; Brent J. Steele, *Ontological Security in International Relations: Self-Identity and the IR State* (London, UK: Routledge, 2008).

⁷Jacob Pramuk, ‘Trump inauguration speech: “Protection will lead to great prosperity and strength”’, *CNBC* (2017), available at: {<https://www.cbc.com/2017/01/20/donald-trump-were-transferring-power-from-washington-back-to-the-people.html>} accessed 17 April 2020.

⁸Bastian A. Vollmer, ‘Categories, practices and the self-reflections on bordering, ordering and othering’, *Tijdschrift voor Economische en Sociale Geografie*, 112:1 (2021), pp. 4–10 (p. 8).

⁹Ali Bilgic, ‘“We are not barbarians”: Gender politics and Turkey’s quest for the West’, *International Relations*, 29:2 (2015), pp. 198–218; Will K. Delehanty and Brent J. Steele, ‘Engaging the narrative in ontological (in)security theory: Insights from feminist IR’, *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 22:3 (2009), pp. 523–40; Catarina Kinnvall, ‘Borders and fear: Insecurity, gender and the far right in Europe’, *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, 23:4 (2015), pp. 514–29;

overtly in relation to the Trump campaign and presidency.¹⁰ Significantly, Will K. Delehanty and Brent J. Steele have argued that feminist scholarship can show how the autobiographical narratives of states that are so central to ontological security are inherently gendered.¹¹ I argue that this focus on gendered ontological security can be extended through an engagement with *gendered bordering practices*.¹² Gendered bordering practices refers to how gender constructions and logics shape and narrate policy positions and actions. Bordering practices are about ontological security. Borders draw the lines of sovereignty and set the limits of bounded conceptions of community and identity. In this sense, acts of bordering and bordering practices are inherently gendered: they are about asserting sovereignty, often through tough discourse or clear delineations of identity and order, and often through militarised means. States may wish to draw the boundaries of the state in with claims to ‘protect’ as much as exclude, and in doing so set the parameters of the self-narrative of the nation-state and how individuals understand their own biographical narratives.

This article explores how gendered bordering practices informed a masculinist self-narrative of ontological (in)security in the US under Trump. But rather than read Trump’s masculinist ideas of ontological security and bordering practices as an aberration, I argue that when examined through a gendered lens, lines of continuity are made visible. Understanding how masculinism operates in ideas of ontological security reveals how notions of gendered bordering, hierarchy, and ordering have been a persistent thread in US politics, rather than an aberrant moment under Trump. A lens on gendered bordering practices shows lines of continuity in US politics with masculinist logics of power, order, submission, and exclusion across seemingly contrasting self-narratives of the nation. I argue that a gendered perspective of bordering practices is less about exposing the chasm between populist and liberal democratic ideas of ontological security, but instead reveals a more blurred picture, rendering ideas of the national self-narrative – ‘who we are’ or ‘who we are not’ – more problematic. In doing so, a key contribution of this article is to broaden the work on ontological security to bring out a more complex understanding of the masculinist narratives and bordering practices that constitute ontological (in)security.

The article commences with a discussion of the connection between ontological security and gendered bordering practices. Taking its cue from Delehanty and Steele, it extends the application of gender beyond contested self-narratives that are themselves possibly held hostage to a binary understanding of alternatives to the masculine idea of the nation, such as maternal dissent and feminist care ethics. While these are worthy and important counternarratives to dominant stories of the self that construct ontological security, these counternarratives risk essentialism.¹³ Instead, I propose examining gendered self-narratives through a masculinist framework, which V. Spike Peterson and Anne Sisson Runyan define as a “‘key move’ in producing, reproducing, and naturalizing gender hierarchy’ and goes beyond embodiments of masculinity and femininity.”¹⁴ Masculinism is a logic and ethos that privileges qualities of masculinity¹⁵ but also performs a

Catarina Kinnvall, ‘Feeling ontologically (in)secure: States, traumas and the governing of gendered space’, *Cooperation and Conflict*, 52:1 (2017), pp. 90–108; Catarina Kinnvall, ‘Populism, ontological insecurity and Hindutva: Modi and the masculinization of Indian politics’, *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 32:3 (2019), pp. 283–302.

¹⁰Alexandra Homolar and Ronnie Scholz, ‘The power of Trump-speak: Populist crisis narratives and ontological security’, *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 32:3 (2019), pp. 344–64; Christine Agius, Annika Bergman Rosamond, and Catarina Kinnvall, ‘Populism, ontological insecurity and gendered nationalism: Masculinity, climate denial and Covid-19’, *Politics, Religion and Ideology*, 21:4 (2020), pp. 432–50.

¹¹Delehanty and Steele, ‘Engaging the narrative in ontological (in)security theory’.

¹²Christine Agius and Emil Edenborg, ‘Gendered bordering practices in Swedish and Russian foreign and security policy’, *Political Geography*, 71 (2019), pp. 56–66.

¹³Elizabeth Frazer and Kimberly Hutchings, ‘Revisiting Ruddick: Feminism, pacifism and non-violence’, *Journal of International Political Theory*, 10:1 (2013), pp. 109–24.

¹⁴V. Spike Peterson and Anne Sisson Runyan, *Global Gender Issues in the New Millennium* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2010), p. 63; Lucy Nicholas and Christine Agius, *The Persistence of Global Masculinism: Discourse, Gender and Neo-Colonial Re-Articulations of Violence* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave, 2018), p. 8.

¹⁵Nicholas and Agius, ‘The persistence of global masculinism’, p. 5.

bordering function in acts of exclusion and othering. Trump's politics and populism has been driven by a masculinist logic and a 'foreclosure of alterity'.¹⁶ A masculinist framework or logic, I argue, can show the complexity of a gendered understanding of ontological security, and can be applied across ideas of strength/weakness, dominance/submission, to 'all those who are feminized, whether women or men'.¹⁷

I then move to examine gendered bordering practices under Trump directed internally and externally, focusing on the border wall with Mexico and military posturing internationally, and examples of othering internally, such as bordering practices intended to define 'real' citizens from 'fraudulent' ones. I show how citizens enacted their sense of ontological insecurity by engaging in such bordering practices, for example, policing territory to exclude unwanted others. But bordering practices also show that a masculinist continuity exists which belies the idea that Trump's amplification of specific bordering practices was 'not who we are': race, exclusion, and gendered power have always been interwoven into the self-narratives of American ontological security, which the final section of the article discusses. Moreover, this masculinist continuity is threaded through multiple counternarratives, including those directed against Trump. While Biden's victory might seem like a counternarrative of America has prevailed, masculinism also occupies the self-narratives of 'mainstream' politics; 'who we are' or 'are not' then becomes a more complicated question.

Gendered ontological security and bordering practices

Ontological security studies has provided analytical depth for understanding not only the self-narratives of actors in the international system, but the complex layers of what it means to secure the self. In International Relations, it has become untethered from analysis of the individual and 'scaled up' to the state and international level,¹⁸ taking into account temporal and relational contexts.¹⁹ At its core, ontological security goes beyond physical security or 'security of survival' to that of security of the self, or 'security of being'.²⁰ To be ontologically secure is to have a 'sense of continuity and order in events', performed through routines, by an actor who possesses a 'biographical continuity' or self-narrative,²¹ without which, actors experience anxiety and an inability to survive. When there is disruption to routines, the consistency of the self becomes destabilised, relationships become uncertain, and disorder and mistrust prevails. As Jennifer Mitzen has noted, actors seek ontological security through routinising relationships with others. Even conflictual relations can provide a sense of certainty and confirm specific identities, and form part of the self-narrative of actors.²² Regardless of the relationship with others, a stable identity and self-narrative is vital for what Catarina Kinnvall calls the 'securitisation of subjectivity', which is described as 'a process that seeks to build walls of ontological security around an idea of the self through the refusal to permit ambiguity or problematisation in cultures or social structures'.²³ Othering can therefore play a role in understanding how states secure themselves.²⁴ While

¹⁶Judith Butler, 'Sexual difference as a question of ethics: Alterities of the flesh in Irigaray and Merleau-Ponty', in Dorothea Olkowski and Gail Weiss (eds), *Feminist Interpretations of Maurice Merleau-Ponty* (Philadelphia, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010), p. 111.

¹⁷Peterson and Runyan, *Global Gender Issues in the New Millennium*, p. 63.

¹⁸Mitzen, 'Ontological security in world politics'.

¹⁹Andrew Hom and Brent J. Steele, 'Anxiety, time, and ontological security's third-image potential', *International Theory*, 12:2 (2020), pp. 322–36.

²⁰Mitzen, 'Ontological security in world politics', p. 342.

²¹Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1991), pp. 243, 54; Mitzen, 'Ontological security in world politics'; Jennifer Mitzen, 'Anchoring Europe's civilizing identity: Habits, capabilities and ontological security', *Journal of European Public Policy*, 13:2 (2006), pp. 270–85; Jelena Subotić, 'Narrative, ontological security, and foreign policy change', *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 12:4 (2016), pp. 610–27.

²²Mitzen, 'Ontological security in world politics', pp. 342–3.

²³Kinnvall, 'Feeling ontologically (in)secure', p. 91.

²⁴Mitzen, 'Anchoring Europe's civilizing identity', p. 274.

Trump's narrative of America was that of ontological insecurity, where global forces and internal enemies have made America unrecognisable to itself, for liberals, Trump's narrative likewise portrayed an idea of America that was not consistent with its biography, one that was inward, exclusionary, and undemocratic, rather than open, tolerant, and democratic. The American Psychological Association's report 'Stress in America: Coping with Change' showed that anxiety over the future of the nation was a source of stress in both political groups (59 per cent for Republicans and 76 per cent for Democrats).²⁵

While ontological security has been examined across different cases from perspectives of post-colonialism, religion, and ethnicity,²⁶ fewer works have explicitly examined the relationship between gender and ontological security.²⁷ Deploying a gender perspective in ontological security provides broader insights into how self-narratives become anchored in ideas about the past, the nation, space, and relations and are reproduced in ways that appear 'natural' or relate to structures that are inherently gendered. Kinnvall, for instance, shows how the interlacing of globalisation, religion, and race produce ideas about the nation that brings forth a metaphor of family that privileges the male in the case of India.²⁸ Seeing the functioning of gender in constructions of ontological security also has implications for how we can understand space as gendered when thinking through the links between collective trauma and affect at local, national, and global levels.²⁹ Delehanty and Steele, drawing on feminist scholarship that sees the nation as gendered, argue that the dominant self-narratives of actors such as states are masculine, rendering competing self-narratives as feminised, subordinated, or subdued. Self-narratives that underscore the nation rely on gendered binaries such as strong/weak, active/passive, rational/irrational, masculine/feminine.³⁰ The 'self' that must be secured is construed in gendered terms.

These features of order, reason, agency, and control are identified with masculinised categories, privileged over feminised qualities such as emotion, passivity, and subjectivity in power relations. Bilgic exemplifies this in broad terms in relation to Western and non-Western power hierarchies, understanding it as a form of gendered ontological insecurity. Enemy images, for example, often invoke ideas of 'uncivilised, barbarous others' who threaten the body politic,

²⁵American Psychological Association, 'Many Americans Stressed about Future of Our Nation'.

²⁶Yoni Abramson, 'Securing the diasporic "self" by travelling abroad: Taglit-Birthright and ontological security', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 45:4 (2019), pp. 656–73; Zeynep Gülsah Çapan and Ayşe Zarakol, 'Turkey's ambivalent self: Ontological insecurity in "Kemalism" versus "Erdoğanism"', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 32:3 (2019), pp. 263–82; Special Issue 'Postcolonial Bordering and Ontological Insecurities', *Postcolonial Studies*, 20:3 (2017); Kinnvall, 'Globalization and religious nationalism'; Kinnvall, 'Borders and fear'; Catarina Kinnvall, 'Ontological insecurities and post-colonial imaginaries: The emotional appeal of populism', *Humanity & Society*, 42:4 (2018), pp. 523–43; Catarina Kinnvall and Paul Nesbitt-Larking, 'Security, subjectivity and space in postcolonial Europe: Muslims in the diaspora', *European Security*, 18:3 (2009), pp. 305–25; Michael Skey, "'A sense of where you belong in the world": National belonging, ontological security and the status of the ethnic majority in England', *Nations and Nationalism*, 16:4 (2010), pp. 715–33; Carmina Yu Untalan, 'Decentering the self, seeing like the other: Toward a postcolonial approach to ontological security', *International Political Sociology*, 14:1 (2020), pp. 40–56; Marco Vieira, 'Understanding resilience in International Relations: The non-aligned movement and ontological security', *International Studies Review*, 18:2 (2016), pp. 290–311; Marco Vieira, '(Re-)imagining the "self" of ontological security: The case of Brazil's ambivalent postcolonial subjectivity', *Millennium*, 46:2 (2018), pp. 142–64.

²⁷Agius, Bergman Rosamond, and Kinnvall, 'Populism, ontological insecurity and gendered nationalism'; Bilgic, "'We are not barbarians"'; Delehanty and Steele, 'Engaging the narrative in ontological (in)security theory'; Kinnvall, 'Globalization and religious nationalism'; Kinnvall, 'Borders and fear'; Kinnvall, 'Feeling ontologically (in)secure'; Kinnvall, 'Populism, ontological insecurity and Hindutva'.

²⁸Catarina Kinnvall, *Globalization and Religious Nationalism in India: The Search for Ontological Security* (London, UK: Routledge, 2007), p. 73.

²⁹Kinnvall, 'Feeling ontologically (in)secure'.

³⁰Delehanty and Steele, 'Engaging the narrative in ontological (in)security theory', p. 528; see also Nira Yuval-Davis, *Gender & Nation* (London, UK: SAGE, 1997); Joane Nagel, 'Masculinity and nationalism: Gender and sexuality in the making of nations', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 21:2 (1998), pp. 242–69.

rendering it vulnerable to invasion, contagion, or possession.³¹ Enemies can be emasculated or seen as menacing or threatening, using brute force and power to overcome virtuous states. Furthermore, gendered nationalism can be directed against the state that is seen to have become ‘feminised’ or weak³² or hierarchicalised in heteronormative terms.³³ In their study of how attitudes towards masculinity influenced American electoral behaviour in 2016, Melissa Deckman and Erin Cassese found that although Trump won the presidency with a very large gender gap, a closer analysis of gendered beliefs, particularly around the idea that America had become ‘too soft and feminine’ closed that gender gap significantly, holding strong appeal for male voters as well as conservative female voters.³⁴ Thus, ontological security can adopt gendered framings.

While identifying self-narratives as predominantly ‘masculine’, in that a hierarchical relationship of power conditions the validity of the self and ontological security, I argue that we can extend this idea further by also seeing how *masculinist* logics can underscore ideas of ontological security. While masculine ontological security can manifest in embodied and hierarchical terms that are about masculinity or different types of masculinities,³⁵ masculinism refers to ‘an underlying ethos or totalizing worldview that implicitly universalizes and privileges the qualities of masculinity, and in doing so, subordinates and “other” alternative ways of understanding, knowing and being’.³⁶

Masculinism can be contrasted with masculinity ‘as self-consciously dominative’³⁷ and can take forms that may be disassociated from gendered hierarchies. It has importance for ‘seeing how a certain logic of gendered meanings and images helps organize the way people interpret events and circumstances, along with the positions and possibilities for action within them, and sometimes provides some rationale for action.’³⁸ For example, the idea of the border is imbued with masculinist logics because the border is not simply a thing that represents a delineation of space, but also establishes the boundaries of belonging, exclusion, violence, and identity. Maintaining that border is tied up with notions of order and protection, which are inherently guided by masculinist logics.

Borders are vital for comprehending the boundaries of the self and ideas of masculinist protection ensure their survival in order to define the self. For Wendy Brown,³⁹ borders are not just about protection: ‘They produce the content of the nations they barricade.’ Masculinist protection of borders implies a form of domination. While seemingly benign, masculinist protection also

³¹Bilgic, “‘We are not barbarians’”, p. 202; V. Spike Peterson, ‘Gendered identities, ideologies, and practices in the context of war and militarism’, in Laura Sjoberg and Sandra Via (eds), *Gender, War, and Militarism: Feminist Perspectives* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2010), pp. 17–29.

³²V. Spike Peterson, ‘Gendered nationalism’, *Peace Review: A Journal of Social Justice*, 6:1 (1994), pp. 77–83; Agius, Bergman Rosamond, and Kinnvall, ‘Populism, ontological insecurity and gendered nationalism’; Siri Hustvedt, ‘Not just economics: White populism and its emotional demons’, *NORA: Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research*, 25:1 (2017), pp. 62–5.

³³Koen Slootmaeckers, ‘Nationalism as competing masculinities: Homophobia as a technology of othering for hetero- and homonationalism’, *Theory and Society*, 48 (2019), pp. 239–65; Agius and Edenborg, ‘Gendered bordering practices’; Emil Edenborg, ‘Homophobia as geopolitics: “Traditional values” and the negotiation of Russia’s place in the world’, in Jon Mulholland, Nicola Montagna, and Erin Sanders-McDonagh (eds), *Gendering Nationalism: Intersections of Nation, Gender and Sexuality* (London, UK: Palgrave, 2018), pp. 67–87.

³⁴Melissa Deckman and Erin Cassese, ‘Gendered nationalism and the 2016 US Presidential Election: How party, class, and beliefs about masculinity shaped voting behavior’, *Politics & Gender*, 17:2 (2019), pp. 277–300 (p. 295).

³⁵Charlotte Hooper, *Manly States: Masculinities, International Relations, and Gender Politics* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2012); Claire Duncanson, ‘Forces for good? Narratives of military masculinity in peacekeeping operations’, *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 11:1 (2009), pp. 63–80; R. W. Connell, ‘Masculinities and globalization’, *Men and Masculinities*, 1:1 (1998), pp. 3–23; R. W. Connell and James W. Messerschmidt, ‘Hegemonic masculinity: Rethinking the concept’, *Gender & Society*, 19:6 (2005), pp. 829–59; Bilgic, “‘We are not barbarians’”.

³⁶Nicholas and Agius, ‘The persistence of global masculinism’, p. 5.

³⁷Iris Marion Young, ‘The logic of masculinist protection: Reflections on the current security state’, *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 29:1 (2003), pp. 1–25 (p. 4).

³⁸Young, ‘The logic of masculinist protection’, p. 2; see also Judith Stiehm, ‘The protected, the protector, the defender’, *Women’s Studies International Forum*, 5:3–4 (1982), pp. 367–76.

³⁹Wendy Brown, *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty* (New York, NY: Zone Books, 2010), p. 41.

performs a boundary-making role, determining ‘good citizenship’, states of emergency and threat, and affirmation of patriotism and oneness with fellow citizens under ‘protective leadership’.⁴⁰ Promising to protect the border – or indeed the boundaries of the self – ensures a stable self-biography and order. Therefore, a gendered and masculinist approach to ontological security, its attendant routines and bordering practices, should be taken seriously.

In this vein, masculinism implies a type of gendered bordering practice. Gendered bordering practices refers to the ways in which gender constructions and logics shape and narrate policy positions and actions. Bordering or ‘boundary-making practices’⁴¹ are of themselves concerned with ontological security. Borders draw the lines of sovereignty and set the limits of bounded conceptions of community and identity, based around ideas of race, gender, an idealised past, and other categories. While we may primarily conceive of bordering practices materially, as in making or constituting borders, they are also ideational and are made logical by the discourses that underpin and rationalise them. Masculinism is thus a governing code⁴² that delineates gendered differentiation and forges ‘symbolic orders of gendered hierarchy’.⁴³ As Critical Border Studies tell us, bordering practices perform statehood, sovereignty, space, and subjectivity⁴⁴ and can take different forms and logics.⁴⁵ While security of the self is the essence of ontological security, it requires bordering practices to do the work of establishing or furnishing self-narratives, both materially and conceptually. If ontological security is centred around self-narratives, bordering practices play a role in ‘authoring’⁴⁶ that story, and that act of authoring can be imbued with power and be gendered. Trump claimed he would reinstate order and protect the nation through a brand of populism driven by masculinist logic. This manifested in his narrative of American identity and primacy, with the promise to ‘build the wall’ on the border with Mexico to nuclear and power posturing on the international stage. This is not to suggest that masculinist bordering practices were particular to Trump’s rhetoric and presidency; as the article will later elaborate, gendered bordering practices can take on subtle forms and continuities that align with logics of hierarchy, violence, and order. The following section delves into these bordering practices under Trump, first by analysing external bordering and then turning its attention to internal bordering practices. Across both internal and external realms, we can identify gendered bordering practices in official and public discourse, policy, and media depictions that narrate a particular story about ontological (in)security.

External threats: The gendered bordering practices of Trump’s ontological (in)security

Ahead of the 2016 presidential election campaign, Trump consistently campaigned on a message of the threat to America from illegal immigration at the Mexican border. For Trump, the US-Mexican border symbolised America’s decline from greatness and was a source of humiliation, making America the ‘dumping ground for everyone else’s problems’. In his 2015 campaign

⁴⁰Young, ‘The logic of masculinist protection’.

⁴¹Brent J. Steele and Alexandra Homolar, ‘Ontological insecurities and the politics of contemporary populism: Introduction to the Special Issue’, *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 32:3 (2019), pp. 214–21 (p. 214).

⁴²Peterson, ‘Gendered nationalism’, p. 18.

⁴³Agius and Edenborg, ‘Gendered bordering practices’, p. 58.

⁴⁴Noel Parker and Nick Vaughan-Williams, ‘Critical border studies: Broadening and deepening the “lines in the sand” agenda’, *Geopolitics*, 17:4 (2012), pp. 727–33; Karine Côté-Boucher, Federica Infantino, and Mark B. Salter, ‘Border security as practice: An agenda for research’, *Security Dialogue*, 45:3 (2014), pp. 195–208; Corey Johnson, Reece Jones, Anssi Paasi, Louise Amore, Alison Mountz, Mark Salter, and Chris Rumford, ‘Interventions on rethinking “the border” in border studies’, *Political Geography*, 30 (2011), pp. 61–9; Victoria M. Basham and Nick Vaughan-Williams, ‘Gender, race and border security practices: A profane reading of “Muscular Liberalism”’, *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 15:4 (2013), pp. 509–27.

⁴⁵Henk van Houtum, ‘The geopolitics of borders and boundaries’, *Geopolitics*, 10:4 (2005), pp. 672–9; Vollmer, ‘Reflections on bordering, ordering and othering’.

⁴⁶Agius and Edenborg, ‘Gendered bordering practices’, p. 57.

announcement speech, he identified Mexicans who cross the border as rapists, who bring drugs and crime into the US, using the murder of Kate Steinle ('beautiful Kate') in San Francisco by an undocumented immigrant, as an argument to "build the wall".⁴⁷ Building the 'big, beautiful wall' across the entire length of the US-Mexico border⁴⁸ (and making Mexico pay for it) became a primary policy goal. In January 2017, one of his first acts was to sign an executive order to begin construction of the border wall. Trump also criticised and defunded 'sanctuary cities' for refusing to cooperate with federal immigration policies to deport immigrants, stating that those jurisdictions 'have caused immeasurable harm to the American people and to the very fabric of our Republic'.⁴⁹ Trump claimed that sanctuary cities protected and allowed into the community illegal immigrants, drug dealers, gang members, and traffickers, thereby endangering law enforcement officers and citizens.⁵⁰ Immigration and border control was a key feature of his presidency from the outset. Cuts to legal immigration and refugee admissions, narrowed eligibility criteria for asylum, increased immigration enforcement with the hiring of over 15,000 border officers, removal of temporary protections for some non-citizens and 'extreme vetting' of immigration applicants featured as key executive orders in the initial days of the Trump presidency.⁵¹ Executive orders to ban travel to the US from select states with Muslim populations (the 'Muslim travel ban') also reinforced the association of radical Islamic terrorist threats.⁵²

The importance of the border wall in terms of ontological security also connected overtly with gendered bordering. In November 2018, Trump warned that a 'large, well-organized caravan of migrants are marching towards our southern border ... It's like an invasion ... These are tough people, in many cases. A lot of young men, strong men. And a lot of men that maybe we don't want in our country.'⁵³ Moreover, Trump suggested that the caravan represented a threat to women: 'I don't want them in our country. And women don't want them in our country. Women want security.'⁵⁴ Relating border insecurity to the possibility of rape and the need to protect (American) women meant reasserting power and sovereign control. Pointing to Europe as an example, he warned that immigration changed 'the fabric of Europe' and its culture⁵⁵ and was quick to jump on reports

⁴⁷Kate Steinle: Trump outrage over murder case acquittal', *BBC News* (2017), available at: {<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-42190455>} accessed 24 June 2021; Jamie R. Abrams, 'The myth of enforcing border security versus the reality of enforcing dominant masculinities', *California Western Law Review*, 56:1 (2020), pp. 69–102 (p. 82).

⁴⁸While walls, fences, and other barriers mark the border with Mexico, the border remains somewhat 'leaky', with some six hundred miles unfenced in the middle of Texas due to private property rights, treaty provisions, floodplains, and litigation issues. By the end of his presidency, only 15 miles of new primary barriers had been built where none had existed previously, and 350 miles of replacement or secondary barrier constructed. Lucy Rodgers and Dominic Bailey, 'Trump wall: How much has he actually built?', *BBC News* (2020), available at: {<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-46824649>} accessed 23 June 2021.

⁴⁹United States Government Publishing Office, 'Executive Order 13768 of January 25, 2017: Enhancing public safety in the interior of the United States', *Federal Register*, 82:8 (2017), pp. 8799–803, available at: {<https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/FR-2017-01-30/pdf/2017-02102.pdf>}.

⁵⁰Donald J. Trump, 'NY MAG: Trump apologized to Hope Hicks when she resigned; Trump pushes death penalty for some drug dealers', *Transcript CNN Newsroom* (2018), available at: {<http://edition.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/1803/19/cnr.06.html>} accessed 14 June 2021.

⁵¹Sarah Pierce, Jessica Bolter, and Andrew Selee, 'US Immigration Policy under Trump: Deep Changes and Lasting Impacts', Migration Policy Institute (2018), pp. 1–3, available at: {<https://www.migrationpolicy.org/research/us-immigration-policy-trump-deep-changes-impacts>}.

⁵²Sabrina Siddiqui, 'Trump signs "extreme vetting" executive order for people entering the US', *The Guardian* (2017), available at: {<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/jan/27/donald-trump-muslim-refugee-ban-executive-action>} accessed 28 June 2020.

⁵³Donald J. Trump, 'Remarks by President Trump on the Illegal Immigration Crisis and Border Security', Washington, DC (1 November 2018), available at: {<https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-illegal-immigration-crisis-border-security/>}.

⁵⁴Ibid.

⁵⁵John Wagner, 'Trump: Immigration is "changing the culture" of Europe and its leaders "better watch themselves"', *Washington Post* (2018), available at: {https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trump-immigration-is-changing-the-culture-of-europe-and-its-leaders-better-watch-themselves/2018/07/13/afb5d9a6-868b-11e8-8f6c-46cb43e3f306_story.html?utm_term=.67547f63816a} accessed 10 May 2020.

about migrant sexual assault in Germany and Sweden. Failure to secure the border meant the very idea of America as a sovereign nation was at risk, with Trump tweeting: ‘If you don’t have borders, then you don’t have a country.’⁵⁶ As Trump struggled to get Congressional approval for funding the border wall, he reinforced the narrative of danger associated with the border by declaring a state of emergency in February 2019; his use of ‘crisis talk’ mobilised the public, heightening fears and insecurities and ‘target[ing] individuals’ drive towards the security-of-Being.⁵⁷ His key policy spoke to his campaign promise and was notably driven not by an influx of undocumented migrants, but rather, protection of the American worker and security.⁵⁸

As Yoni Abrams⁵⁹ has argued, American immigration laws and policies are mired in ‘multi-dimensional narratives of class and race’ but also ‘reinforce dominant masculinities at the border’ via exclusion. Dominant self-narratives involve ‘othering’, to be sure, but what makes them dominant are the logics that underpin them. In constructing the idea of ontological security threats at the border, Trump’s discourse was underscored by a gendered and masculinist logic that regarded immigrant males as threats to be repelled, and immigrant females and children as threats to be controlled. ‘Bad hombres’ brought sexual threat to the nation and were equated with crime and the deterioration of society. The bodies of immigrant women were sites of control and exclusion: immigrant women detained by US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) in Georgia in 2019 were reportedly subjected to hysterectomies without their informed consent.⁶⁰ Furthermore, a policy memorandum also removed domestic violence or gang violence as a reason for seeking asylum, and abortions were inaccessible to women in detention, even if pregnancies were a result of rape or threatened the woman’s life.⁶¹

The ‘zero tolerance’ policy, which criminalised border crossings resulted in nearly two thousand children separated from their families (which the administration claimed was a continuation of pre-existing policy, more on which below). The then Attorney General, Jeff Sessions, who announced the policy, blamed families for ‘smuggling children’⁶² and right-wing media commentators dismissed claims that the treatment of children was harsh. Anne Coulter called the immigrant children ‘child actors’, coached by liberals, and Laura Ingraham described the facilities where children were kept as ‘essentially summer camps’. Then Homeland Security Secretary Kirstjen Nielsen claimed drug traffickers and gang members used children to pose as family units at the border.⁶³ While many Americans regarded images of crying children separated from their families with horror – note Rachel Maddow breaking down reading a news bulletin about ‘tender-age’ shelters – right-wing claims of media bias and ‘fake news’ in reporting served to double down on the hard-line position, with Tucker Carlson stating those who expressed sympathy or shock ‘care far more about foreigners than about their own people’.⁶⁴ Trump supporters

⁵⁶Blair Guild, ‘Trump: “If you don’t have borders, then you don’t have a country”’, *CBS News* (2018), available at: {<https://www.cbsnews.com/news/trump-rally-south-carolina-today-governor-henry-mcmaster-today-live-stream-updates/>} accessed 12 April 2020.

⁵⁷Homolar and Scholz, ‘The power of Trump-speak’, p. 346.

⁵⁸Claudio J. Perez, ‘How U.S. policy has failed immigrant children: Family separation in the Obama and Trump eras’, *Family Law Quarterly*, 54:1 (2020), pp. 37–66.

⁵⁹Abrams, ‘Enforcing border security versus enforcing dominant masculinities’, p. 72.

⁶⁰Kalifa J. Wright, Lydia E Pace, C. Nicholas Cueno, and Deborah Bartz, ‘Reproductive injustice at the southern border and beyond: An analysis of current events and hope for the future’, *Women’s Health Issues*, 31:4 (2021), pp. 306–09.

⁶¹Abrams, ‘Enforcing border security versus enforcing dominant masculinities’, pp. 94–9.

⁶²Pete Williams, ‘Sessions: Parents, children entering U.S. illegally will be separated’, *NBC News* (2018), available at: {<https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/justice-department/sessions-parents-children-entering-us-illegally-will-be-separated-n872081>} accessed 13 June 2021.

⁶³Philip Bump, ‘How to mislead with statistics, DHS Secretary Nielsen edition’, *Washington Post* (2018), available at: {<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/politics/wp/2018/06/18/how-to-mislead-with-statistics-dhs-secretary-nielsen-edition/>} accessed 13 June 2021.

⁶⁴Megan Garber, ‘How to look away’, *The Atlantic* (2018), available at: {<https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2018/06/how-to-look-away/563234/>}.

blamed parents for bringing children across the border ‘illegally’.⁶⁵ As Leandra Hinojosa Hernández⁶⁶ has pointed out, family separations represent a form of reproductive violence and injustice, not simply in demographic or biological terms. This reproductive violence, when viewed through feminist and border theory, brings to light the geopolitical and macro effects of bordering practices: the violence and poverty that the US contributed to in El Salvador and Guatemala produced the forced migration that is now presented as a bordering threat to the US body politic.

Within the state, ‘suspect’ bodies were also subject to exclusionary practices. Examples include efforts to exclude LGBTI personnel in the military, and to curtail pathways to citizenship open to residents with language or medical skills in through programmes like the 2009 Military Accessions Vital to the National Interest (MAVNI).⁶⁷ Additionally, efforts to revoke ‘fraudulent’ citizenship saw a new office created by the US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) in June 2018, which would investigate naturalised citizens suspected of fraudulent applications, and revoke their citizenship or ‘denaturalise’ these citizens. The possibility of having citizenship status revoked can be seen as a strategy of ontological insecurity, with ‘many naturalized citizens were left questioning the validity of an immigration status they assumed would always be safe’ or deter the pursuit of naturalisation, even if eligible.⁶⁸

Beyond the border, Trump’s response to ontological insecurity was masculinised to restore American strength from a position of humiliation. The ‘Trump Doctrine’ broadly formed around anti-globalisation and nationalism, and rejected liberal internationalism, which, Trump argued, had weakened and humiliated America, and reduced its power. In his reading, trade deals with countries like Mexico and China decided by establishment elites exploited US workers and the economy, which he portrayed in terms of America being ‘raped’.⁶⁹ The capture of a US patrol boat by Iran when it deviated into Iranian waters in January 2016 was seized upon by Trump to present a humiliating picture of American sailors ‘on their hands and knees’.⁷⁰ Promising protection from Islamic extremism and ISIS, Trump associated Obama’s ‘soft’ approach with a feminisation of the state and promised to restore US dignity and power militarily in terms not far removed from that of rape revenge narratives, using ‘abject themes and imagery’ to invite his audiences ‘to rehearse their own felt marginality to the political system’.⁷¹ Humiliation discourses ‘provide the affective fuel that enables a radical departure from established domestic and international policy norms and problematises policy choices centered on collaboration, dialogue, and peaceful conflict resolution’.⁷²

While logics of masculinist protection informed his vision of the external realm, Trump also sought to solidify an idea of masculine leadership both domestically and on the international stage that would return a sense of power and order, demonstrating an admiration for military

⁶⁵Martin Savidge, Tristan Smith, and Emanuela Grinberg, ‘What Trump supporters think of family separations at the border’, *CNN* (2018), available at: {<https://edition.cnn.com/2018/06/19/us/trump-voters-family-separation/index.html>} accessed 21 June 2021.

⁶⁶Leandra Hinojosa Hernández, ‘Feminist approaches to border studies and gender violence: Family separation as reproductive injustice’, *Women’s Studies in Communication*, 42:2 (2019), pp. 130–4.

⁶⁷Vanessa Romo, ‘U.S. Army is discharging immigrant recruits who were promised citizenship’, *NPR* (2018), available at: {<https://www.npr.org/2018/07/09/626773440/u-s-army-is-discharging-immigrant-recruits-who-were-promised-citizenship>} accessed 14 August 2020.

⁶⁸Stephanie deGooyer, ‘Why Trump’s denaturalization task force matters’, *The Nation* (2018), available at: {<https://www.thenation.com/article/trumps-denaturalization-task-force-matters/>}.

⁶⁹‘Trump accuses China of “raping” US with unfair trade policy’, *BBC News* (2016), available at: {<https://www.bbc.com/news/election-us-2016-36185012>} accessed 19 August 2020.

⁷⁰Sarah N. Lynch, ‘U.S. sailors captured by Iran were held at gunpoint: U.S. military’, *Reuters* (2016), available at: {<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-iran-boats-idUSKCN0UW1Q7>} accessed 18 September 2020.

⁷¹Paul Elliott Johnson, ‘The art of masculine victimhood: Donald Trump’s demagoguery’, *Women’s Studies in Communication*, 40:3 (2017), pp. 229–50 (pp. 240, 234).

⁷²Alexandra Homolar and Georg Löffmann, ‘Populism and the affective politics of humiliation narratives’, *Global Studies Quarterly*, 1:1 (2021), pp. 1–11 (p. 2).

aesthetics to bolster his image and increasing the defence budget. This also took embodied form, not simply in his veneration of ‘hard man’ leaders such as Putin, but also in asserting his hierarchical position. Interactions with North Korea devolved into a game of one-upmanship and exposed an embodied masculinity in US leadership (belittling North Korean leader, Kim Jong-un, by bragging that his nuclear button that was ‘bigger’ and ‘worked’).

In his first significant military operation, Trump’s decision to launch military strikes on a Syrian airbase in response to a chemical weapons attack was seen as a decisive moment in the Trump presidency. Military action transformed him *into* a president after a stumbling start to his presidency, full of legislative failures and an inability to get his agenda off the ground. Trump was apparently persuaded to act on the behest of his daughter Ivanka, who, as a mother, was reportedly ‘heartbroken and outraged’ at the images of child victims of the chemical weapons attack.⁷³ The strike launches not only spoke to an idea of protection⁷⁴ but seemingly rescued perceptions that his presidency, up until that point, was weak and impotent. According to CNN host Fareed Zakaria, Trump’s military strike on Syria was the moment he ‘became’ the president. Brian Williams, host of MSNBC’s *The 11th Hour* programme, hailed the 59 Tomahawk missiles that were launched as ‘beautiful pictures of fearsome armaments’, quoting a line from a Leonard Cohen song, ‘First We Take Manhattan’ (‘I am guided by the beauty of our weapons’).⁷⁵ For a candidate who had previously argued against action in Syria, the chemical weapons attack was also an opportunity for Trump to pitch himself as the ‘stronger’ man compared to Obama, who he accused of being indecisive and unable to act when the ‘red line’ was crossed. Trump was now ‘stepping up’ to the responsibilities of his role as president to ‘act to enforce international norms’ and to ‘have this broader moral and political purpose’.⁷⁶ According to a CBS public opinion poll, 57 per cent approved the strikes, and Trump saw an increase to 43 per cent in his approval ratings.⁷⁷ This strategy of ‘remasculinising’ sought to restore American ‘greatness’ via military and economic power in response to the precarity and humiliation felt by his supporters.⁷⁸

Similar projections of power can be seen in Afghanistan in the use of the ‘Mother of all Bombs’ (or the GBU-43/B Massive Ordnance Air Blast) against Islamic State targets in April 2017. Again, media coverage focused on the choice of weapon, which was inaccurately reported as equivalent to the nuclear bomb dropped on Hiroshima. Video images of the explosion were played on ‘Fox and Friends’ to Toby Keith’s song ‘Courtesy of the Red, White and Blue (The Angry American)’.⁷⁹ In Clara Eroukhmanoff’s analysis,⁸⁰ this bombing can be read as an effort to feminise Islamic State while reasserting American masculinity and disciplining others. The strike was purported to ‘protect’ Americans and at the same time infantilise enemies both within the state

⁷³Alexander Smith, ‘Eric Trump says Syria strike was swayed by “heartbroken” Ivanka’, *NBC News* (2017), available at: {<https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/eric-trump-says-syria-strike-was-swayed-heartbroken-ivanka-n745021>} accessed 4 July 2019.

⁷⁴Young, ‘The logic of masculinist protection’.

⁷⁵Maximillian Alvarez, ‘Stupid, brutal world’, *The Baffler* (2017), available at: {<https://thebaffler.com/the-poverty-of-theory/stupid-brutal-world-alvarez/>}.

⁷⁶Jessica Chasmar, ‘Fareed Zakaria: “Donald Trump became president” last night’, *The Washington Times* (2017), available at: {<https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2017/apr/7/fareed-zakaria-donald-trump-became-president-last-/>} accessed 8 October 2021.

⁷⁷Jennifer De Pinto, Fred Backus, Kabir Khanna, and Anthony Salvanto, ‘What Americans think about U.S. strike on Syria’, *CBS* (2017), available at: {<https://www.cbsnews.com/news/cbs-news-poll-shows-divergence-in-americans-opinion-of-us-strike-vs-syria/>}; Nicholas and Agius, ‘The persistence of global masculinism’, pp. 104–05.

⁷⁸Johnson, ‘The art of masculine victimhood’, p. 241.

⁷⁹Jeffrey Lewis, ‘The “Mother of All Bombs” isn’t that big: Why did it unsettle us so much?’, *The Washington Post* (2017), available at: {https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2017/04/14/the-mother-of-all-bombs-isnt-that-big-why-did-it-unsettle-us-so-much/?utm_term=.4a9ab5a927ff} accessed 30 May 2020.

⁸⁰Clara Eroukhmanoff, ‘A feminist reading of foreign policy under Trump: Mother of all bombs, wall, and the “locker room banter”’, *Critical Studies on Security*, 5:3 (2017), pp. 177–81.

and outside it; on the one hand highlighting a willingness to act in contradistinction to Obama being ‘gentle’ on ISIS and associating the action with the protection of US citizens. Moreover, in this role he adopted the idea of the white masculine protector of vulnerable Americans against men of colour.⁸¹ In the wake of the Orlando shooting in 2016, ‘radical Islam’ was targeted as a threat to LGBTQ Americans, who were the ‘feminised object of protection’ to pitch a modern America against an illiberal Islam. This can be seen as a layered and gendered type of boundary-making or bordering practice, which involves hierarchies of race and sexuality. Trump’s reliance on embodied nationalism and masculinist logics of protection saw women, children (saving ‘beautiful babies’ from chemical weapons attacks in Syria, although not extending this protection to migrant children at the border) and LGBTQ people as ‘passive objects of male control’.⁸²

While most analyses of such forms of masculinist protection are focused on Trump, it is also worthwhile to consider how such logics are interpreted and filter down to the public and their conceptions of ontological (in)security. It is important at this juncture to note that Trump’s rhetoric and narrative of insecurity not only resonated with his supporters but draws on pre-existing policy practice and forms of exclusion that have historical grounding and rely on narrative tropes that constitute the nation. The following section explores select ‘bordering practices’ of citizens in this way.

The bordering practices of citizens

Ontological (in)security at the border has not simply been shaped and enacted by the Trump administration. It has included the active participation of ‘the people’ which speaks to recent debates about how material, embodied, and physical security can be closely related to ontological security;⁸³ bodies, territory, and borders, for example, play a role in ontological security. Moreover, this agency and boundary-making contains gendered dimensions. While white men are highly visible in such examples (for instance, white supremacist rallies are overwhelmingly male, and armed males were highly represented in anti-lockdown protests during the Covid-19 pandemic), women are also active participants. The ‘Karen’ phenomenon has seen white women policing their neighbourhoods for the presence of unwanted (black and Latino) people, who are seen as threats. On the same day as the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis, a viral video showed a white woman calling the police claiming a black man (who was birdwatching) threatened her and her dog in Central Park in New York. This ‘weaponisation’ of white femininity⁸⁴ spoke to fears of the displacement of white narratives and privilege. During the 2020 election campaign, Trump appealed to ‘suburban housewives’, claiming that Biden would ‘destroy your neighbourhood and the American Dream’;⁸⁵ thereby evoking bordered divisions that relied on gender, privilege/wealth, as well as demographics (suburban/metropolis).

The historical lineage of white femininity and masculinist protection also speaks to vigilantism, which in the contemporary context can be seen as an extension of policing and regulation,⁸⁶ enforcing boundaries of permissible bodies. At the border, the US has a longer history of

⁸¹James W. Messerschmidt and Tristan Bridges, ‘Trump and the politics of fluid masculinities’, *Gender & Society* blog (2017), available at: {<https://gendersociety.wordpress.com/2017/07/21/trump-and-the-politics-of-fluid-masculinities/>}.

⁸²Banu Gökarksel and Sara H. Smith, “‘Making America great again’? The fascist body politics of Donald Trump’, *Political Geography*, 54 (2016), pp. 79–81 (p. 80).

⁸³Nina C. Krickel-Choi, ‘The embodied state: Why and how physical security matters for ontological security’, *Journal of International Relations and Development* (2021), available at: {<https://doi.org/10.1057/s41268-021-00219-x>}; Elke Krahnmann, ‘The market for ontological security’, *European Security*, 27:3 (2018), pp. 356–73.

⁸⁴Diane Negra and Julia Leyda, ‘Querying “Karen”: The rise of the angry white woman’, *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 24:1 (2021), pp. 350–7 (p. 352).

⁸⁵Lauren Fedor, ‘Trump seeks to woo “suburban housewives of America”’, *Financial Times* (2020), available at: {<https://www.ft.com/content/ee9271b6-4930-465f-b697-0879ea1a38a1>} accessed 12 November 2020.

⁸⁶Apryl Williams, ‘Black memes matter: #LivingWhileBlack with Becky and Karen’, *Social Media + Society*, October to December (2020), pp. 1–14 (p. 8).

private citizens, vigilante, and militia groups engaged in ideas of protection of the border and exclusion of unwanted bodies. Civilian patrols at the border have existed in different forms for at least 150 years, with the Texas Rangers securing white settlement in the nineteenth century⁸⁷ to contemporary examples of vigilantism in the Klu Klux Klan in the 1970s, the now defunct Minutemen during the Bush era, anti-government militia groups during the Clinton and Obama eras, and nativist vigilantes during the Trump administration.⁸⁸ Proximity to the border also heightens ontological insecurity. According to Timothy B. Grevette, those living closer to the border are more favourably inclined to support border security and the wall. Alongside media stories that compound the optics of threat and insecurity at the border, the routines that construct ontological security are practised on a regular basis: visible border security patrols, warning signs, and checkpoints, and increased militarisation of the border heighten the sense of insecurity.⁸⁹

The rise in societal cleavages and violence have also been observed. After nearly a decade in decline, hate crime rose by 17 per cent in 2017⁹⁰ and increased by almost 20 per cent during Trump's time in office. Attacks on Muslims also reportedly surpassed 2001 levels in the first year of Trump's presidency.⁹¹ FBI hate crime statistics show that single-bias incidents (which refers to cases where one or more offences are motivated by the same bias) averaged 7,081 between reporting that covered 2016–19, with a notable increase of approximately 1,000 incidents pre-2017. Black and African American, and anti-Jewish bias are overly represented in the data. In the most recently available figures, anti-female bias is three times higher than anti-male under the category of gender bias.⁹²

The messages and rhetoric of Trump emboldened individual acts of ontological security seeking. Trump gave his tacit and at times overt support to such action, delineating a line between those he considered true patriots and those who he regarded as undermining the idea of the nation. His response to the Black Lives Matter protests in the wake of the police killing of George Floyd in Minnesota was to call the movement violent and anarchic, and associate it with 'left-wing mobs' intent on a culture war that threatened to 'silence dissent ... and to bully Americans into abandoning their own values'.⁹³ He was reluctant to condemn white supremacy, referring to 'very fine people' on both sides in the wake of the violent 'Unite the Right' rally in Charlottesville, Virginia in 2017.⁹⁴ The relative deprecation felt by white Trump supporters draws on a range of humiliation narratives, some which extend back into US history; as Alexandra Homolar and Ronnie Löffmann argue, white supremacist participants at the Charlottesville rally railed against the perceived loss of "their" white past' when protesting the removal of the statue of General Robert E. Lee, commander

⁸⁷Stephen R. Vina, Blas Nunez-Neto, and Alyssa Bartlett Weir, *Civilian Patrols Along the Border: Legal and Policy Issues*, CRS Report for Congress (2006), available at: {<https://sgp.fas.org/crs/homesecc/RL33353.pdf>}.

⁸⁸Greg Grandin, 'How violent American vigilantes at the border led to Trump's wall', *The Guardian* (2019), available at: {<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2019/feb/28/how-violent-american-vigilantes-at-the-border-led-to-trumps-wall>}; Cynthia Weber, 'Design, translation, citizenship: Reflections on the virtual (de)territorialization of the US–Mexico border', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 30:3 (2012), pp. 482–96 (pp. 485–6); John R. Parsons, 'Border militias: Experience, narrative, and the moral imperative to act', *Journal of Extreme Anthropology*, 4:1 (2020), pp. 1–21.

⁸⁹Timothy B. Grevette, 'Politics, time, space, and attitudes toward US–Mexico border security', *Political Geography*, 65 (2018), pp. 107–16 (pp. 109–10).

⁹⁰FBI Uniform Crime Reporting, '2017 Hate Crime Statistics' (2018), available at: {<https://ucr.fbi.gov/hate-crime/2017/topic-pages/incidents-and-offenses>} accessed 19 August 2021.

⁹¹Katayoun Kishi, 'Assaults Against Muslims in U.S. Surpass 2001 Level', Pew Research Centre (2017), available at: {<http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/11/15/assaults-against-muslims-in-u-s-surpass-2001-level/>}.

⁹²FBI Uniform Crime Reporting, Hate Crime Statistics, available at: {<https://www.fbi.gov/services/cjis/ucr/publications#Hate-Crime%20Statistics>} accessed 19 August 2021.

⁹³Nick Niedzwiedek, 'Trump goes after Black Lives Matter, "toxic propaganda" in schools', *Politico* (2020), available at: {<https://www.politico.com/news/2020/09/17/trump-black-lives-matter-1619-project-417162>} accessed 5 July 2021.

⁹⁴Full text: Trump's comments on white supremacists, "alt-left" in Charlottesville', *Politico* (2017), available at: {<https://www.politico.com/story/2017/08/15/full-text-trump-comments-white-supremacists-alt-left-transcript-241662>} accessed 28 March 2020.

of the Confederate States Army. The perceived loss of white male dominance in the present aligned with idealised revisionist narratives of the past, such as the Lost Cause of the Confederacy, which casts the Confederate States in the American Civil War as victims.⁹⁵

In his speech at the 6 January ‘Save America’ rally, Trump reinforced the idea that the nation was threatened because of the election results, declaring to his listeners ‘if you don’t fight like hell you’re not going to have a country anymore’.⁹⁶ The presence of the Confederacy battle flag that accompanied some rioters to the Capitol in January 2021 drew further connections with self-narratives of resistance and defence of a lost (white) past. In his words to white supremacist and right-wing groups such as the Proud Boys (‘stand back and stand by’) and the Capitol Hill rioters (‘We love you. You’re very special’) Trump appeared to reinforce their sense of agency and the permissiveness of their actions. As Paul Elliott Johnson⁹⁷ argued, Trump’s supporters responded to the idea that they had long been powerless by seeing ‘felt powerlessness as agency’; marginalisation ‘serve[d] as technologies for them to understand who they are’. Trump’s populist rhetoric was ‘an act of boundary drawing, which divides the true members of the nation from both internal and external foes. Such rhetoric strengthens the sense of identity within the national community, making boundaries around the community salient and actionable.’⁹⁸ Of the 509 arrested for participating in the Capitol Hill riot to date, 53 explained that they were inspired by their support for Trump as the reason for joining in the riot, with some claiming they were acting on his instruction. White males predominantly participated, with 17 per cent linked to extremist groups and 14 per cent were current and former military personnel and law enforcement officers. Notably, the messages that rioters posted ahead of their involvement provide some insights into how they understand their own sense of insecurity. Participation in the riots was widely considered an act of security by patriots, of ‘taking back’ ‘our house’ and the country from the left and ‘treasonous members of government’.⁹⁹ Nowhere was this more on display during the riot when a woman protestor appeared shocked that police confronted the rioters: ‘This is not America ... They’re shooting at us. They’re supposed to shoot BLM, but they’re shooting the patriots.’¹⁰⁰

Lines of continuity: Past-present-future (‘this is /not/ who we are’)

While the above examples suggest a seismic shift in the political and social landscape under Trump’s presidency, some lines of continuity exist with past ideas of ontological security and bordering practices. In this final section, I argue that masculinist bordering practices and ‘securitisation of the self’ have been threaded through the self-narrative of the US on both sides of the political spectrum. Here I limit the discussion to a comparison with Obama’s presidency, which Trump sought to stand in distinct opposition to, to capture how gendered bordering practices were also present under Obama, with Trump amplifying aspects of bordering to suit his agenda.

While differing forms of masculinities can be observed between Trump and Obama, there are some points of convergence in how ontological security has been practiced, albeit narrated differently. For instance, Obama exhibited a different type of ‘hybrid masculinity’, that Emma

⁹⁵Homolar and Löffmann, ‘Populism and affective politics of humiliation narratives’, p. 5.

⁹⁶‘Capitol riots: Did Trump’s words at rally incite violence?’, *BBC News* (2021), available at: {<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-55640437>} accessed 11 April 2021.

⁹⁷Johnson, ‘The art of masculine victimhood’, p. 239.

⁹⁸Matthew Levinger, ‘Love, fear, anger: The emotional arc of populist rhetoric’, *Narrative and Conflict: Explorations in Theory and Practice*, 6:1 (2017), p. 12.

⁹⁹‘The Capitol siege: The arrested and their stories’, *NPR* (2021), available at: {<https://www.npr.org/2021/02/09/965472049/the-capitol-siege-the-arrested-and-their-stories#database>} accessed 21 June 2021.

¹⁰⁰Andrew McCormick, ‘Madness on Capitol Hill’, *The Nation* (2021), available at: {<https://www.thenation.com/article/politics/capitol-trump-insurrection-explosions/>} accessed 8 February 2021.

Cannen describes as progressive, disruptive of the norms of male white leadership, both black/white, foreign/domestic,¹⁰¹ which aligned with his bordering practices and ideas of ontological security. This translated into a form of global ordering and management of violence that relied on seemingly neutral categories of protection and technological imperative (for example, in the form of drone strikes) that work to reshape borderlines. Obama's drone programme was undergirded by a desire to protect and order global security while maintaining a consistent self-narrative of the liberal state and the just actor.¹⁰² He also invoked the idea of masculinist protection with reference to his daughters at the 2010 White House Correspondents Dinner, joking that he would launch Predator drones at the Jonas Brothers.¹⁰³ Obama also represented an idea of masculinist protection in the context of external threats, namely global terrorism. The killing of Osama bin Laden under his command was received with wide approval, with justice seen to be delivered and a humiliated nation restored and avenged.¹⁰⁴

Moreover, bordering policies to protect the state from immigration have a longer legacy than Trump's 'border wall'. These bordering practices are historically situated in the context of the Mexican-American War and with the creation of a US Border Patrol agency in 1924, which was mostly directed towards keeping Asian and South European immigrants out via interdiction. The 'war on illegals' grew in the 1970s and intensified by the 1990s. Under Clinton, tighter border control was implemented in 1994 along the San-Diego-Tijuana border zone. The Fence Act of 2006 under Bush enjoyed broad support from Congressional Republicans and some Democrats in Congress, including Clinton, Obama, and Biden as senators, who voted in favour of the Act. Enhanced border security was also favoured by both 2008 presidential candidates, McCain and Obama.¹⁰⁵ Obama continued the 1997 Bush-era Flores Settlement Agreement, which dealt with the detention, treatment, and release of accompanied and unaccompanied immigrant children.¹⁰⁶

While Trump's idea of ontological security was to protect the nation against external others, his efforts to identify and problematise 'inauthentic' citizens as threats again speaks to pre-existing policy practices. Trump's efforts to denaturalise US citizens (mentioned above) was not new; the Trump administration relied on cases identified under Obama's Operation Janus. This operation came after it was found that the government failed to review the fingerprint records of around 150,000 naturalisation cases, prompting fears that undesirable individuals or those who had been previously deported, may have obtained citizenship by fraudulent means (with a focus on specific countries that may represent at threat – mostly Muslim countries). It was followed up by Operation Second Look, which examined leads from Operation Janus with the intention of examining 700,000 remaining files for possible fraudulent citizenship applications. Going back further, denaturalisation is found in the 1906 Naturalisation Act, which addressed fraudulent applications, but later developed a more political and racial motivation

¹⁰¹Emma Cannen, 'Avant-garde militarism and a post-hip-hop president', *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 16:2 (2014), pp. 255–77 (pp. 259–60).

¹⁰²Christine Agius, 'Ordering without bordering: Drones, the unbordering of late modern warfare and ontological insecurity', *Postcolonial Studies*, 20:3 (2017), pp. 370–86.

¹⁰³Rachel Weiner, 'Obama drone joke: Was it offensive?', *Washington Post* (2010), available at: {<http://voices.washingtonpost.com/44/2010/05/obama-drone-joke-was-it-offens.html>}.

¹⁰⁴Lloyd Cox and Steve Wood, "'Got him": Revenge, emotions, and the killing of Osama bin Laden', *Review of International Studies*, 43:1 (2017), p. 112–29.

¹⁰⁵Grevette, 'Politics, time, space, and attitudes toward US–Mexico border security', pp. 107–09.

¹⁰⁶It was this agreement that Trump argued he was continuing from the Obama administration when he was criticised for his 'zero tolerance' policy. But his claim that Obama deported more immigrants and detained children is somewhat untrue. Under Obama, voluntary as well as involuntary removals were counted together. While detentions existed under the Obama administration, Trump's 'zero tolerance' policy saw anyone crossing the border without inspection charged with a criminal offence and taken to criminal detention facilities where children were not permitted. While detentions continued under Obama with the Secure Communities programme (2008–14), criminality was reserved for serious crimes that threatened national security. See Perez, 'How U.S. policy has failed immigrant children'.

under the 1907 Expatriation Act which removed unwanted individuals based on ethnic background, gender, and political views, including ‘un-American races’, such as Asian.¹⁰⁷

Furthermore, Trump was also subject to counternarratives that rely on gendered lines. An example of this emerges in the idea of the ‘true’ or ‘authentic’ citizen, which was used against Trump during his meeting with Putin in Helsinki in 2018. Trump was widely condemned for believing Putin’s denial of Russian interference in the 2016 US presidential election over US intelligence agencies.¹⁰⁸ His position on Russia in Helsinki was read not only in terms of treason, but also in terms of weakness and submission to Putin.¹⁰⁹ Media analysts poured over images of the meeting, noting it was ‘an encounter between a supplicant (Trump) and a master (Putin)’¹¹⁰ and that Trump was Putin’s ‘puppet’ in liberal media satire.¹¹¹ While Trump deployed a masculinist worldview and ethos, he was also subjected to it.

Boundary-making and gendered bordering reproduce ideas of what ontological (in)security is and how it is narrated. Nevertheless, within ontological security studies, while acknowledgement is often made to alternative dominant stories of the self, the way in which we understand those alternative self-narratives can sometimes still revolve on a binary scale. While it may seem that Trump’s presidency represented a masculinist and masculine self-narrative of the American nation, its main competing self-narrative, the liberal democratic self, still retains elements of masculinist logic and bordering practices that remain problematic. For example, Hillary Clinton portrayed herself as an experienced and rational contender for the presidency in 2016 against an irrational and inexperienced Trump. A further step back to 2007 in the race for the Democratic presidential nomination also saw Clinton claiming experience against Obama and a willingness to use nuclear weapons in pursuit of terrorist targets in Afghanistan or Pakistan.¹¹²

These continuities in masculinist logic reveal how ontological insecurity rests on highly gendered lines. Feminist counternarratives and resistance to the masculine state exist, for example in reproductive rights and the Women’s March.¹¹³ Yet a more complicated picture emerges to show degrees of masculinist alternative self-narratives of the bordering practices on which ideas of the nation, who protects it and ensures its security, is based. In Delehanty and Steele’s elaboration of a feminist counter narrative to the masculine state, a focus on feminist care ethics and maternal dissent still aligns an overtly feminine idea of an alternative self which presents femininity as the natural opposite to the masculine state.

Seeing how the counternarrative to Trump is also mired in ideas of gendered bordering practices is one example that blurs the lines. Another perspective also relates to the felt ontological insecurity that pitched Trump and his followers as irrational against a liberal self-narrative

¹⁰⁷deGooyer, ‘Why Trump’s denaturalization task force matters’.

¹⁰⁸Alison Rourke, ‘“Putin’s poodle”: Newspapers declare Trump a traitor after Helsinki summit’, *The Guardian* (2018), available at: {<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/jul/17/putins-poodle-newspapers-declare-trump-a-traitor-after-helsinki-summit>}.

¹⁰⁹‘Captain America: Donald Trump is “Putin’s puppet”’, *BBC* (2018), available at: {<https://www.bbc.com/news/newsbeat-44856717>}; Anushay Hossain, ‘Hillary Clinton was exactly right about Trump being Putin’s puppet’, *CNN* (2018), available at: {<https://edition.cnn.com/2018/07/16/opinions/clinton-trump-puppet-opinion-hossain/index.html>}; Dartunorro Clark, ‘“Shameful”, “treasonous”, “disgraceful”: Trump slammed from all sides for news conference with Putin’, *NBC News* (2018), available at: {<https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/donald-trump/shameful-treasonous-disgrace-lawmakers-pundits-react-trump-s-joint-news-n891736>}.

¹¹⁰Ruth Ben-Ghiat, ‘Trump and Putin: The pictures tell the story’, *CNN* (2018), available at: {<https://edition.cnn.com/2018/07/18/opinions/these-pictures-tell-story-of-trump-and-putin-ben-ghiat/index.html>}.

¹¹¹Katharina Wiedlack, ‘Enemy number one or gay clown? The Russian president, masculinity and populism in US media’, *NORMA*, 15:1 (2020), pp. 59–75.

¹¹²Steve Holland, ‘Obama, Clinton in new flap, over nuclear weapons’, *Reuters* (2016), available at: {<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-politics-obama-idUSN0238110020070803>}.

¹¹³Delehanty and Steele, ‘Engaging the narrative in ontological (in)security theory’; Cynthia Enloe, *The Big Push: Exposing and Challenging the Persistence of Patriarchy* (Oxford, UK: Myriad, 2017).

that appeared logical and contained and not beholden to emotion. The Obama era was characterised by an emotive celebration of progressive values, from the ‘Yes we can’ catchphrase to Obama’s oratory prowess and enunciation of values and emotional responses to issues such as gun violence. Clinton’s labelling of Trump supporters as ‘deplorables’ was adopted as a form of strength and pride for his followers. The acts of violence carried out by Trump supporters, such as an attack on a homeless Latino man in Boston in 2016, were described by Trump as ‘passionate followers’ who ‘love this country and want this country to be great again’.¹¹⁴ Emotions are recoded and disassociated as a sign of weakness or femininity – as Emmy Eklundh astutely observed, Brett Kavanaugh’s angry and emotional response to sexual assault accusations at the Senate Judiciary Committee in 2018 was rewarded with him being sworn in as a Justice of the US Supreme Court.¹¹⁵ While we can recognise alternative or competing narratives that counter this masculine idea, an overtly feminine counter narrative risks reinforcing the binaries that construct that difference in the first place and prevents us from seeing how masculinism is intricately threaded through competing self-narratives.

Concluding remarks

At Biden’s inauguration, the youth poet laureate, Amanda Gorman, capped off a ‘historic day’, which saw Kamala Harris sworn in as the first black and South Asian American woman vice president and an America that seemed ‘back to normal’. Her poem, ‘The Hill We Climb’, spoke of unity over division and an idea of a consistent self, emerging from dark times: ‘Somehow we’ve weathered and witnessed a nation that isn’t broken, but simply unfinished.’¹¹⁶ The idea of the unfinished nation referenced in the poem presents an intriguing challenge to notions of ontological security, which relies very much on the idea of a consistent self over time. The optimism that America’s self-narrative can change and evolve moves the imaginary of ontological security away from fixed notions of the self to something more fluid and as yet unformed, yet still inspired or shaped by the past.

How nations narrate the stories of themselves is vitally important, impacting societal and international relations and providing the logics and reasoning for how they act politically and what they do to secure themselves. Ontological security provides an extremely useful lens for understanding the complex layers of what it means to secure the self. By focusing on the gendered and masculinised underpinnings of ontological security, however, we gain a deeper insight into the logic and functioning of such. Through examining internal and external bordering practices, the visibility of masculinist logic is present but also nuanced. Furthermore, those bordering practices are inherently gendered at both the external and internal level. They require hierarchies, silences, and ordering to operate.

Despite the overt masculinism of Trump, Carol Cohn reminds us that the Trump moment was ‘not an exception ... Ideas about masculinity and femininity already distort the ways we think about international politics and security. And they matter.’¹¹⁷ Furthermore, the important lessons of a gendered perspective on ontological security and bordering practices is to continue to observe and critique how masculinist logics both subtly and overtly shape ideas about ourselves and others, and what we call the domestic and the external realm. In one sense, we do not even need to examine the overt masculinism of Trump to see how ideas about protection, strength, and

¹¹⁴Cited in Gökarkınel and Smith, “‘Making America great again’?”, p. 80.

¹¹⁵Emmy Eklundh, ‘Excluding emotions: The performative function of populism’, *Partecipazione e conflitto*, 13:1 (2020), pp. 107–31.

¹¹⁶Amanda Gorman, ‘The Hill We Climb: The Amanda Gorman poem that stole the inauguration show’, *The Guardian* (2021), available at: {<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/jan/20/amanda-gorman-poem-biden-inauguration-transcript>}.

¹¹⁷Carol Cohn, ‘The perils of mixing masculinity and missiles’, *New York Times* (2018), available at: {<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/05/opinion/security-masculinity-nuclear-weapons.html>}.

other binaries operate, which feminists have long identified as shaping our world and our understanding of it. Trump's masculinity has been almost a caricature performance and while he was no ordinary president, his presidency, according to Jon Herbert, Trevor McCrisken, and Andrew Wroe,¹¹⁸ was very ordinary in terms of achievements and outcomes. Yet while the predominant focus on Trump has been his populism and divisionary politics, it can distract from ongoing lines of masculinist logic and bordering practices that persist. Liberal panic over Trump's narrative of white America 'belies the ways that Trump is a more colorful example of the country's foundations in exclusionary violence and the centering of heroic white masculinity (as savior to vulnerable and pure white femininity) as a means to write a script justifying conquest, exclusion, hardened borders, and gendered, racialized, and xenophobic policies.'¹¹⁹ Understanding these connections, crossovers, and intimate relations adds to a more complex understanding of ontological (in)security that can be applied more broadly when thinking about politics outside the 'norm'.

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¹¹⁸Jon Herbert, Trevor McCrisken, and Andrew Wroe, *The Ordinary Presidency of Donald J. Trump* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

¹¹⁹Gorkarikel and Smith in Philip E. Steinberg, Sam Page, Jason Dittmer, Banu Gökarişel, Sara B. Smith, Alan Ingram, and Natalie Koch, 'Reassessing the Trump presidency, one year on', *Political Geography*, 62 (2018), pp. 207–15 (p. 210).