Located in the hot, dry northeast of San Diego County, an area once known for citrus groves of lemons and oranges, Escondido, California, at first glance, looks like a quiet, inland town. Yet, for years the city has been in the eye of a national storm over immigration, a role that has earned it the moniker “California’s Little Arizona” in reference to its harsh treatment of undocumented migrants. Given that history, it came as no surprise when in the summer of 2014 protests flared over a petition from the federal government to build a shelter for unaccompanied migrant minors within the city limits.

The petition landed on the desk of the town’s planning commission, and on June 24 the commission convened to discuss the proposal in a meeting open to the public. More than 200 people attended, and there was strong opposition. Escondido’s mayor likened the shelter to a prison (Phillips 2014), and a city councilman said he would “stand strong” against the federal proposal (Jones 2014b). Employing a similar tone, a communiqué declared that the city risked being invaded by foreign criminals if the shelter were built (Ocaño 2014).

Others, albeit a minority, were sympathetic to the project. They claimed the shelter would in fact house vulnerable children fleeing violence in their home countries. Meanwhile, representatives of the nonprofit organization Southwest Key, charged with running the shelter, tried with little success to explain how the center would work, field questions, and address apprehensions among those gathered.

In the end, the opposition won. The commission voted unanimously to reject the proposal. In July it met to reevaluate the petition and again dismissed it. A month later, in an attempt to intercept an appeal by the ACLU on behalf of Southwest Key, the city council approved a zoning code change to prohibit the construction of a shelter on the property.
identified in the federal requisition. On October 14 the city council reviewed an appeal of the planning commission’s decision and rejected it.

According to U.S. Customs and Border Protection (U.S. CBP) statistics, 2014 may well stand out as a watershed year for the arrival of child and adolescent immigrants to the United States. That year more than 68,000 crossed into the United States, twice the number in 2013 and four times that in 2011. More than 98 percent came from Central America and Mexico (U.S. CBP 2016, 2018).

The growing numbers of minors led to heated debates at all levels of government, especially at the U.S.-México border. The governors of Arizona and Texas called on the federal government to strengthen their borders with México. In contrast, California’s governor, going over the heads of some members of the state legislature, put aside $3 million to help cover the minors’ legal expenses. Finally, in June, President Obama announced he would allocate $4 billion to care for the children and adolescents, pay the costs of their detention, and expedite their legal processes.

Mobilizations in favor of and against the minors erupted in towns and cities throughout the Southwest. In San Diego, the Border Angels and churches of various denominations organized collections of food and clothing. Others denounced the mistreatment of the young Central Americans and Mexicans in detention centers. Meanwhile, the Federation for American Immigration Reform opposed any offer of aid. It was in this cauldron of support and opposition that the events in Escondido took place.

At first glance, the mobilizations that summer appeared to adhere to two competing narratives that have steered much of the debate concerning immigration in the country. While different in content and aim, both have drawn on perceptions of risk and vulnerability. One, hostile and exclusionary, has emphasized national borders, security, and identity and portrayed immigrants as a risk. The other, more welcoming and inclusive, has underscored immigrants’ vulnerability and suffering. In that sense, the events that took place in Escondido reflected familiar struggles over immigration in the country at large.

The young Central Americans and Mexicans scheduled to go to Escondido, however, were also minors, making the dispute one about children and adolescents as well. It engaged, in particular, a narrative that has
dominated thinking about children and childhood in the United States, that of the innocent child. Those in favor of the petition to build a shelter portrayed the minors as vulnerable children fleeing violence in their countries of origin. Those protesting it rarely referred to the migrants’ young age; some even argued that the group of minors included some more than 20 years of age. Ultimately, in rejecting the proposal, Escondido’s planning commission yielded to the narrative of the immigrant as a risk. This chapter examines why.

I propose that we can begin to understand the mobilizations and their outcome by exploring the ways both narratives, about immigrants and about children, alluded to and employed the body to press their claims. While the narratives that surfaced in Escondido mirrored wider sociocultural themes about immigration and childhood, the scenarios of risk and vulnerability they portrayed referred in multiple and concerted ways to the body, in general, and to specific bodies, as both physical and metaphorical entities. Those protesting the petition described the minors as out of control, diseased, and dangerous—imminent threats to the residents’ physical safety, the well-being of Escondido, and, ultimately, the larger body of national civic values and institutions. Those in favor, referring to the Central Americans and Mexicans as “children,” emphasized the immigrants’ young age, vulnerability, and need for protection. In short, bodies played a central role in the dispute and, consequently, offer an epistemological starting point for understanding what happened in Escondido.

This chapter is divided into four parts. The first focuses on the narratives of the immigrant threat and the innocent child, then turns to the process of embodying both. The second covers the arguments for and against building the shelter in Escondido and highlights salient themes. The third, a reflection, returns to the question of why the narrative of the immigrant threat prevailed over that of the innocent child. It suggests that in order to understand why, we need to understand what embodying the narratives did and how that embodiment unfolded. The last part, a final note, summarizes the plight of child immigrants at the U.S.-México border today.

The analysis is based on newspaper accounts from local and regional outlets that offered both press and online formats. I used the news stories both to document the protests and counterprotests, that is, to record the sequence of events, as they occurred between June 24 and October 22,
2014, and to register what those protesting the shelter’s construction had to say and what counterprotestors said in response.

I also turned to news accounts because of the role they play in shaping what we perceive, know, and feel about our world. As part of the conglomerate that Boyer calls “technologies and circuits of mediated discourse,” media reflect and shape contemporary subjectivity, in this case, about immigrants, but also about childhood and adolescence (2011:88). As Boyer writes, “News media take for granted shared experience, shared language, shared territoriality, all these roots of modern conceptions of ‘culture.’ They may indeed address, in a formal sense, an audience of ‘strangers’ and ‘others,’ but they also assume and articulate a certain intimacy among these strangers under the sign of national culture,” in this case that of the United States, as reflected in the town of Escondido (Boyer 2011:90). In other words, news media inform contemporary “common sense,” making them a social force in the day-to-day of modern governance (Boyer 2011:87).

The media do their work by constructing stories, that is, by shaping facts into coherent and meaningful narrations of events (Santa Ana 2013:181). In the case of Escondido, the facts—the minors’ numbers and origins, for example—became intelligible and meaningful when they fit (or failed to fit) narratives already in circulation about immigrants and children.

As such, although news sources may not tell an audience what to think, they can and do set agendas and frame how subjects are presented to the public at large (Burroughs 2013:166–167). To paraphrase Lang and Lang, they call attention to issues and shape how we think and feel about them (cited in McCombs and Shaw 1972:177). Of course, some social groups are more susceptible than others to this kind of representation—undocumented immigrants, for example (Cottle, cited in Saeed 2007:444).

**NARRATIVE AND BODY**

**NARRATIVES OF IMMIGRANTS AND CHILDREN**

*The Meaning of Narrative*

In Barbara Hardy’s words, “we dream in narrative, daydream in narrative, remember, anticipate, hope, despair, believe, doubt, plan, revise, criticize,
construct, gossip, learn, hate and love by narrative” (1968:5). In our fictions and in our actions and thoughts, we are storytelling animals, to paraphrase MacIntyre (1981:216). Or, as Shenhav proposes, “humans have a natural tendency to think in narrative form” (2006:245).

According to White, a narrative is “a verbal structure in the form of a prose discourse. . . which [marks] off the events contained in [it]” from other events to recreate reality and put forward knowledge about that reality (1973:2). While a sequence of events need not include causal connections, without them it lacks cohesion (Shenhav 2003:247). Thus, an effective narrative sets off beginnings and comes to a close when actions and people so bracketed arrive at a resolution, often after passing through a culmination of some kind (White 1973:6). Another way of thinking about narratives is to see them as “trajectories plotted upon material reality by our imagination” (Cover 1983:5).

The process of emplotment, of selecting events as beginnings or endings and thus granting them significance, helps make the chain of events initiated and brought to an end intelligible (MacIntyre 1981:197). By enclosing a sequence, a narrative takes it out of the mass of facts composing a given reality and gives those facts order and coherence. In other words, narratives make life, both in its day-to-day materializations and in its longue durée, comprehensible and endow it with meaning. Indeed, Cover argues that they are “indispensable in the quest for meaning” (1981:4), or, as Shenhav writes, through narratives “people deal with a non-narrative reality” (2003:250).

Implicitly, an underlying telos drives an effective narrative (MacIntyre 1981:200). Telos, the moving force behind a story, is integral to causality. It links values, motives, and purposes to action, the possibility of control, and the attribution and acceptance of responsibility and blame (Edwards, cited in Bacchi 2000:45; Stone 1989:283). Guided by intentions of varying clarity and consciousness, stories “lead” us to imagined futures (Cover 1983:10).

As such, narratives lie at the heart of identity. Personal identity and narrative are mutually constituting, suggests MacIntyre, so that in positing the question “who am I?” and “what am I to do?,” we imply another question, that is, “Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?” (1981:201). They are “templates for orienting and acting in the world,” providing people with a means to understand their past and make sense of and direct actions in the present and the future (Jacobs 2007:205).
In this sense, narratives serve as moral guideposts, setting up good and evil, heroes and antiheroes, to weigh beliefs and values (Jacobs 2007:206). They may impel us forward or repel us; either way, each one builds on what Cover calls a “prescriptive point, its moral.” An effective narrative endows a view of the future and its potential with normative significance (Cover 1983:5–10).

As normative or moral “templates” orienting our actions, narratives articulate the personal with the collective and are, consequently, integral to the social fabric of neighborhoods, communities, towns, cities, and nations, where they shape social ties and relationships. They are, in this way, inherently about social relations. Not only do narratives say something about who “you” and “I/we” are, they also imply what may happen if and when we meet. In Escondido, the protesters’ narrative scripted the young Central Americans and Mexicans as dangerous immigrants, even before their arrival, and warned that their presence would harm “natives” of Escondido and upset their way of life. Counterprotestors, in turn, portrayed the minors as young children fleeing dangerous countries of origin for the safety of the United States where they hoped to find sanctuary.

To repeat, in the dispute over whether to approve the petition to build a shelter or not, two narratives—one about immigrants, the other about children—stood out. Both set out to define who the young Central Americans and Mexicans were and foretell the impact they would likely have (or not have) on individual residents and Escondido. While couched in the particularities of Escondido, those competing narratives also reflected larger national understandings and sentiments about immigrants and children. Thus, in order to understand their appeal, it helps to situate them in the larger national context.

The Narrative of the Immigrant Threat

The narrative of the immigrant threat is grounded in the belief that the presence of foreigners endangers the values, institutions, and identity of the United States. Rooted in a binary opposition of “native” and “foreign,” it portrays immigrants as inherently different and threatening to the well-being and interests of “natives.” As such, immigrants and immigration are imbued with risk, and everything “native” is inherently vulnerable in their presence.
Notwithstanding its contemporary appeal among many of those debating immigration today, the narrative of the immigrant threat dates to the early years of the nation’s history. It gave birth to anti-immigrant political parties, such as the Know-Nothings in the 1850s, and led to demands to restrict the naturalization of foreigners in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Fehrenbacher 1969:101; Higham 1965:4, 97). Not surprisingly, it has gone hand in glove with racism and shaped ethnic-racial relations in the country. It drove the persecution of Chinese in the 1880s and efforts to put into law the Chinese Exclusion Act (Higham 1965:25) and set the course for the 1924 quota system restricting the immigration of southern and eastern Europeans and Africans and banning Arabs and Asians.

Racism and anti-immigrant sentiment drove the country’s westward expansion in the nineteenth century and steered debate over how to incorporate territories conquered in the Mexican-American War. Ironically, it reined in U.S. efforts to colonize all of México; according to arguments of the time, the absorption of so many Mexicans into the North American union would stunt the country’s development and progress (Horsman 1981:238; Noel 2014:9). In the twentieth century, racism and nativism inflamed anti-Mexican sentiments (de Leon 1983:150), stoked fears of “invasions” from south of the border, incited violence against Mexicans (massive deportations in the 1930s, the Zoot Suit Riots, for example), and created a breeding ground for draconian deportation laws and practices. Today, writes Newton, “the category ‘illegal immigrant’ has become a condensation symbol for an invasion of the American Southwest, fiscal crisis, welfare abuse, crime, and Mexican immigration” (2008:19–21).

The Narrative of Child Innocence

At the same time, the young Central Americans and Mexicans to be housed in Escondido were minors. Thus, narratives about children and adolescents surfaced as well during the days of protest and counterprotest. As I suggest below, one dominated—that of the innocent child.

Grounded in a biological and developmental approach to childhood and adolescence, the term “minor” refers to those under 18 years of age. When applied to unaccompanied children, it influences and conditions norms for their inclusion in or exclusion from the United States:
immigrants not yet 18 are housed separately from those 18 or older; some legal tools are applicable only to those under 18—“special juvenile immigrant status,” for instance; immigrants 18 and older, in the legal lingo, “age out.”

From the perspective of child innocence, the concept of “minor” is a negation: minors are nonadults and thus it is in relation to adulthood that the term acquires its particular meaning. Only adults have the capacity to think and act rationally and exercise full autonomy; full citizenship, with all its rights and obligations before society and the state, is possible only to them. Minors, in contrast, deemed not yet able to think and reason as adults, lack autonomy (Pasquerella 2004:490) and are dependent on adults, especially those in their immediate families. Thus, their identity is fundamentally relational and dependent (Pasquerella 2004:491; Wall 2006:526). Fathers and mothers are expected to act on their children’s behalf, or, in the words of Pasquerella (2004:491), “they are the child’s agents” (Wall 2006:526).

Given the minor’s dependence on family, his or her needs and fate are considered primarily a domestic and private matter and out of the hands of the state (Arneil 2002:73–74). Minors belong to and in domestic arrangements. Only in cases of negligence or abuse may the state intervene and override family authority.

At the same time, children and adolescents embody deeply held beliefs about moral goodness. In his classic study of childhood and family in Europe, Ariès writes that in the seventeenth century “an essential concept won acceptance: that of the innocence of childhood” (Aries 1962:110), an attribute others see reflected later in the “sacralisation” of childhood and the notion of children’s inherent vulnerability (Meyer 2007:90; Neustadter 1992:71; Zelizer 1985). As the authors of an editorial in the journal *Childhood* note, “Childhood confronts one inescapably as a moral problem . . . [it] abhors and disallows moral agnosticism” (Cook 2017:3).

In a Weberian sense, infants, children, and adolescents are ideal types of human potential, reserves of “virtue” embodying intangibles such as hope, purity, and promise held up as models of human worthiness in the public eye. Despite the wide range of evidence that has worn down the border separating childhood from adulthood—child workers and soldiers, teen mothers, and street children—proof of a child’s authenticity still depends
largely on the degree to which she or he exemplifies innocence—that which sets him or her morally apart from adults.

Given this premise, what happens to children and adolescents who do not live with families or who hold jobs or commit crimes? Moreover, where do minors who do not exemplify innocence, as culturally defined, stand in the eyes of civil society and the state? I suggest that at best they become mired in ambiguity, their vulnerability suspect. At worst, they are seen as dangerous to the community. In other words, to varying degrees they are perceived and portrayed as transgressors. Their inability, or “failure,” to abide by the standards of the ideal child, to embody innocence, puts in doubt, or outrightly denies, their authenticity as minors. As Meyer argues, “if children and childhood are defined by innocence, then children who do not conform to this image are excluded” (Meyer 2007:94). Even worse, they may become trapped in what Valentine refers to as the “discourse of evil” (Valentine, qtd. in Meyer 2007:87); no longer vulnerable, they exemplify danger and are deemed unfit for society.

In this sense, children and childhood make a deep emotional appeal, what one observer refers to as the “the evaluation of children in terms of emotion” and another as “being valued exclusively in emotional terms” (Cunningham 1998:1207). On the one hand, the vocabulary of innocence portrays children as inherently vulnerable, dependent, virtuous, and in need of protection. On the other, those who appear un-childlike (street children, child soldiers, child immigrants, members of gangs and drug cartels) provoke moral unease, if not panic (Aitken 2001:123). Thus, contemporary understandings and sentiments about children scan a wide arc of possibility—from images of weak, tender, angelic creatures to dangerous, amoral predators (Katz 2008; Meyer 2007:87). Simultaneously endangered and dangerous, they incite anxiety about the adult world and, as Katz argues, become “readily available for mobilization around moral panics and the definition of social ills” (Katz 2008:7).

EMBODYING NARRATIVES

I have proposed that the narratives employed in Escondido were about bodies. In epistemological terms, emphasizing the body’s significance acknowledges that “every aspect of the human being is grounded in specific
forms of bodily engagement” and that “our sense of what is real begins with and depends crucially upon our bodies” (Johnson 2007:11; Lakoff and Johnson 1999:17). From the perspective of bodily engagement, or embodiment, the narratives that surfaced in Escondido, whether hostile or welcoming, were packed with understandings and sentiments about bodies. In short, they made claims about what an immigrant body is and does and about what makes a child childlike.

Acknowledging the importance of the body has critical implications, for if the body lies at the core of both narratives, as I suggest, it also offers a lens through which to explore the meaning and impact of those narratives. As Scheper-Hughes and Lock write, “insofar as the body is both a physical and cultural artifact, it is not always possible to see where nature ends and culture begins”—it is “simultaneously a physical and symbolic artifact, as both naturally and culturally produced, and as securely anchored in a particular historical moment” (1987:7).

In Escondido the narrated body of the threatening immigrant prevailed over that of the innocent child. I propose that examining how both narratives embodied unaccompanied migrant minors can shed light on the role and impact the narratives played in the dispute over the petition to build a shelter.

As a starting point, the body draws attention to aspects that might otherwise remain silenced or invisible. I am speaking here of emotions and feelings, especially those linked to risk and vulnerability. While recent research has raised greater awareness of the critical role emotions and feelings play in “our ability to experience the meaning of a given situation, action, event or utterance” (Johnson 2007:44) (and, thus, to know what to do from moment to moment), it is equally important to recognize the part the body plays in the origin and shape of feelings and emotions, that is, as a means to make sense of the world we live in (Johnson 2007:9). As Johnson argues, emotions and feelings are “bodily processes” anchored in “changes in our body state” (2007:60–61). Reading and hearing the protesters’ and counterprotestors’ narratives through the body offers a means to explore the way fear, empathy, dread, anger, and compassion gave expression to and energized the narratives and, ultimately, the actions people took.5

In that sense, the mobilizations in Escondido in the summer of 2014 were in no small measure disputes over which narrative the young Cen-
tral Americans and Mexicans embodied. Thus, in order to understand why the narrative of the immigrant threat prevailed, we need to examine how the minors were embodied. I begin that discussion with a review of the arguments used to reject and support the federal petition to build a shelter and, ultimately, whether to welcome or turn away the unaccompanied children.

**PROTEST AND COUNTERPROTEST**

**PROTEST**

Those objecting to the minors’ arrival underscored their undocumented immigration status and “illegality.” A city commissioner asked rhetorically if the children had violated a federal or local law; the answer was a decisive “Yes” (Ocaño 2014). Still others said that building a shelter for minors “who snuck across the border would send the wrong message” (Replogle 2014b). At the October 14 meeting an Escondido resident complained, “We’re telling our children: If you don’t like the law, then it’s OK to break it” (Noriega 2015).

Demands followed to safeguard the community’s security. At the June 24 meeting, fears spread that the minors would “run loose” in the city. In response, groups backing the proposal assured those gathered that the minors’ movements would be restricted to the installation; they would not leave the premises save for religious or medical reasons, or for a few carefully supervised recreational and educational outings. In addition, the building proposal included a six-foot fence intended to enclose the facility and prevent the children from fleeing (Replogle 2014a). One resident, however, claimed the neighborhood proposed for the shelter was “already deteriorating simply upon the threat of this inappropriate facility,” and observed a “proliferation of signs” going up in the area announcing “No Trespassing” and “Beware of Dog,” as well as a “presence of firearms” (Jones 2014a).

Protesters insisted that crime would go up. A flyer warned that nothing would prevent the young migrants from jumping over the fence and making their way throughout the region and committing crimes (Jones 2014b). Escondido’s mayor worried that the minors would not be properly vetted for criminal histories (Jones 2014a; Phillips 2014), and a man
attending the June 24 gathering announced that most of the minors belonged to Central American gangs and speculated that rape would increase in the city (Frank 2014). According to one resident, the shelter was in reality a federal detention center for youth (Phillips 2014), an opinion echoed by a resident of Escondido who argued that Southwest Key would turn the shelter into “a federal detention facility for juveniles” (Phillips 2014).

The immigrants were described as a health risk. The mayor worried the minors would not have to pass a health inspection before entering the city (Phillips 2014). The assistant planning director for Escondido said city residents had sent him letters and emails citing the risk of airborne illnesses if the shelter were built (Replogle 2014b). Striking a similar note, the state congressman representing the district containing Escondido declared the minors would spread tuberculosis and measles (Walker 2014).

Other objections, focusing on costs, claimed housing the young immigrants would strain the city’s finances. Some complained the shelter would lower real estate values (Jones 2014b). A county supervisor wanted confirmation that the minors’ presence would not depress the tax base and drain the city’s financial reserves (Replogle 2014b), and the San Diego County Board of Supervisors called on the Obama administration to reimburse any costs to the county if the shelter were approved (Walker 2014).

The young migrants’ arrival was compared to an “invasion” (Ocaño 2014). At the June 24 meeting a sign read, “Already too many! No more Illegals!” (Phillips 2014). According to one report, those in attendance at the June 24 meeting believed the children would inevitably escape the shelter, on average two a night (Ocaño 2014). Indeed, in a radio interview prior to the June 24 meeting, the mayor complained that Escondido already had been “disproportionately impacted in the past by illegal migration,” which had led city authorities “to take some policy measure to stop the influx of people” (Noriega 2015).

Demands to secure the city’s safety led to calls to fortify the nation’s borders and fix immigration policy. The minors’ presence was offered up as one more proof of the federal government’s failure to protect the nation’s borders against security threats and lax policies toward undocumented migrants in general (Fox News 2014; Replogle 2014b). A city official called the minors’ presence a disaster of the Obama administration (Ocaño 2014). In a similar tone, the mayor criticized President
Obama and his administration’s inability to “resolve the immigration issue” (Jones 2014a).

Racial divisions and nativist sentiments surfaced throughout the days of protest. At the June 24 meeting, those against the proposal were mostly white, while the few in favor, approximately 20, were Latino (Jones 2014b). At the October 14 meeting, according to one account, “some people carried small signs. One, pointed at the side of the room filled with Latinos, read ‘Go Home.’ Another one, pointed at the mostly white anti-shelter crowd, read ‘Go Back to Europe’” (Jones 2014d). Later that same day, rumors spread that those supporting the petition had not stood up at the recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance (Jones 2014d).

COUNTERPROTEST

From the beginning, those in favor of building the shelter argued against approaching it as an immigration issue. Referring to the city’s reputation and history, Olga Diaz, the only Latina on the city council, said, “There are some topics that come before us that are things we cannot logically discuss, and immigration is one of them” (Jones 2014a). In short, treating the petition as a project to house immigrants would deadlock any attempt to solve the dispute.

Instead, those in favor talked about defending children. A representative of Southwest Key said the “center was about helping children” and likened the failure to support it to ignoring “the humanitarian needs of kids” (Jones 2014b). A young Marine said he wanted to give the children a chance (Phillips 2014), and at the city council meeting in July, counterprotesters brought signs that said, “Don’t be Afraid of the Children” (Washington Times 2014).6

Others tried to frame the shelter in humanitarian and moral terms. At the June 24 meeting, a representative of Southwest Key asked those attending to “stand on the side of humanity” (Jones 2014b); similarly, a man voicing his frustration told a reporter that those protesting the shelter didn’t “understand that it’s a humanitarian proposal” (Ocaño 2014). During the planning commission’s July 23 meeting to ratify its initial rejection of the petition, counterprotesters held up signs that said “Shame on You” and “Migrant Lives Matter,” echoing the call to end violence against African Americans (Los Angeles Times 2014). Later in September,
in its appeal of the ruling to reject the shelter, the ACLU argued that the children deserved to be treated with “compassion and dignity” and had the right to due process and legal protection (*Latin American Herald Tribune* 2014). As a young Marine argued, referring to Escondido’s punitive treatment of immigrants: “If you don’t pass this thing . . . Escondido is going to continue being the armpit of the immigration of the west coast” (Phillips 2014).

Finally, many denounced what they saw as openly racist attacks on the minors. Arguing the ACLU’s case, the legal director of the organization’s San Diego chapter said the opposition was based on “unfounded hostility and bias towards immigrant youth” and spoke of fighting “hostility, discrimination, and bias” (Jones 2014c). A resident of Oceanside denounced the city council for making decisions based on “racist thoughts” (Jones 2014d). Finally, a lawsuit, filed in May of 2015, accused Escondido “of manipulating local zoning laws to prohibit the facility and of citing unfounded land use concerns as a pretext to discriminate against the migrant children” (Noriega 2015).

**Reflection**

The title of this chapter refers to Escondido as “California’s little Arizona,” in reference to the city’s historically harsh approach to undocumented immigration. To be sure, it could be argued that opposition to the shelter won because many of the city’s residents and officials had favored, if not advocated for, punitive immigration policies in the past. In 2006 the city attempted to pass a housing ordinance that would have fined landlords who rented to undocumented immigrants, in effect making it almost impossible for the undocumented to live in the city (Jones 2014a).7 Soon after, local police set up checkpoints, ostensibly to catch drunk drivers but also to check driver’s licenses, in what many immigrant rights groups argued was a thinly veiled effort to apprehend undocumented immigrants. Around the same time, the city banned parking on front lawns and tried to push through a law to limit the number of cars parked in a predominantly Latino neighborhood. Then, in 2010, in an unusual and informal arrangement between Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and the Escondido city police department, ICE agents were stationed in police headquarters and allowed to accompany local law enforcement
on patrols through the city (Noriega 2015). In short, as a city known for its antagonism toward undocumented immigrants, Escondido was fertile ground for the mobilizations that took place in the summer of 2014.

That said, the shelter was intended to house children, and many came out to emphasize that point and support its construction. In other words, the government’s proposal, put up for review and debate beginning in June 2014, was as much an issue about minors as it was about immigrants. Consequently, the mobilizations and their outcome hinged to a large degree on the question of whether the Central Americans and Mexicans should be seen and treated as children or immigrants. Not surprisingly, in determining whether they were one or the other and in framing arguments for and against the shelter, both sides in the debate looked to the children themselves. In the process they referenced the body time and again.

From the beginning, bodies were central to both narratives. They appeared in protesters’ references to viruses and rape, to boys and girls jumping over fences and escaping into Escondido’s neighborhoods, and in claims that some of the minors were over 20 years of age. Likewise, when alluding to vulnerable “natives” exposed to disease and sexual assault, those protesting the shelter made references to the bodies of Escondido’s residents. To be sure, those favoring the petition also referenced bodies in their defense of the young immigrants—portraying them as “kids” in need of humanitarian aid.

Physical bodies became metaphors, especially in the narrative of the immigrant threat. In associating the young Central Americans and Mexicans with risks to Escondido and its residents, those opposed to the shelter transformed the minors into a metaphor for danger, as the embodiment not only of specific threats but ultimately of risk itself. Similarly, the bodies of residents became proxies for Escondido and, by extension, the United States, vulnerable and under potential assault, its epidermis breached by Central Americans and Mexicans crossing the border. Whereas among those in favor of the building the shelter, the minors symbolized humanitarian need, a metaphor for the “right thing to do” and a moral obligation to the vulnerable among us.

I suggest both sides drew on the body because of the power of such allusions, especially with regard to risk and vulnerability. Narrative embodiment lent itself to the protesters’ and counterprotesters’ conviction that what they knew about the minors was true and became the source
of the strength of those convictions. To be sure, both camps kept “redeploying” the body, endowing and re-endowing Central American and Mexican bodies with traits, drives, motives, desires, and interests to make their claims about who and what was at stake. In short, both sides embodied the narratives because of what embodiment did. Thus, in order to understand the successful rejection of the petition to build a shelter, we need to understand the role narrative embodiment played, especially with regard to the portrayal of the immigrant threat.

To begin, in referencing the body, protesters transformed the minors’ possible arrival from an abstract and hypothetical risk into scenarios that felt “real.” In effect, embodying the narrative made it possible to “sense” the minors. Once reconfigured, they became imagined subjects to be treated as if they were true to life. In other words, narrative embodiment made the young Central Americans and Mexicans palpable, rendering the possibility of assault and crime real as well.

Once embodied, the narrative took on a powerful subjective life. Embodiment tapped into emotions and feelings that infused the risks—viruses, sexual assault, youth prowling the streets of Escondido—with heightened urgency and danger. Through bodily engagement, the narrative “touched” those disputing the shelter, provoking dread, fear, anger, outrage, thus capturing the imagination and steeping it in feelings of vulnerability and living at risk.

As Walby, Spencer, and Hunt write, “emotions move between bodies, aligning subjects with some and against others. . . . Through the circulation of emotion, bodies and worlds materialize and take shape. Emotions are crucial to the way bodies become problematized in relation to other bodies, producing the effect of collectivities” (2012:5). Dominant emotions spread among those in opposition to the shelter and swept them up in the fervor of the moment, in essence enclosing them in a common emotional life centered around their fear, dread, anger, outrage. As Anna Gibbs notes, “bodies can catch feelings as easily as catch fire: affect leaps from one body to another” (qtd. in Ahmed 2007:125). I would add that once bodies “catch” feelings, those feelings “stick,” in Ahmed’s terms, leaving people under their influence for varying lengths of time (2007:127).

The protesters’ emotional focus, in turn, responded to and reflected the minors’ narrow portrayal, reduced to a handful of menacing traits
and actions. As Fassin writes: “Ascription is the foundational act through which racialization is produced” (2011:422), what Fanon describes as being “overdetermined from without” (qtd. in Fassin 2011:422). Thus, the minors’ reduction to distinct and disdainful “essences” led to the biologization of perceived differences (Maldonado 2009:1027), ultimately transforming the children into foreign objects of derision.

That racialization, of course, tapped into historical narratives associated with immigration and race in the United States, especially with regard to nonwhite bodies. As stated above, racialized narratives are present in the country’s foundations as a nation-state. Since the eighteenth century, nonwhite “others” have embodied racial inferiority and risk to the country’s integrity and future. In the specific case of migrants from México, white racism has used and depended on racialized epithets—“mongrels,” “criminals,” and “rapists” among them—to describe Mexicans, justify their exclusion, and incite violence against them (Horsman 1981:208–228). To this day, such imaginaries sustain exclusions of people viewed as “un-American” or “inassimilable” and continue to reinforce laws and practices that exclude and marginalize groups of people, among them immigrants (Johnson 1998:114). In Escondido, opposition to the shelter drew on that history to anchor presumed risks to those who considered themselves authentically “American”—“natives” of Escondido—and to what made them “American.” As such, residents of Escondido needed only to seize on the young Central Americans’ and Mexicans’ “foreignness,” racialized “otherness,” and undocumented status to raise the specter of a threat to the country’s national security, sovereignty, and identity and to demand that the young racialized others be prohibited from settling in Escondido.

To the degree that criminality, sexual precociousness, and violence came to mark the young migrants’ bodies, defining not only who they were but their intentions (what they would most likely do and what would most likely happen, if they were allowed into Escondido), “native” bodies became increasingly more vulnerable, as narrative binaries came into play. Thus, to the extent that the young immigrants became dangerous and predatory, residents of Escondido became, by similar degree, susceptible to disease, violence, and threats to their way of life.

The plea of one city council member not to treat the proposal as an immigration issue but as a matter of child protection summed up
the challenge the counterprotesters faced. In order to overturn the city council’s rejection of the petition, counterprotesters had to “dislodge” the federal proposal from its moorings as an issue about immigration and reframe it as a matter of child protection, that is, supplant the narrative of the immigrant threat with that of the innocent child. That meant replacing the body of the immigrant with that of the child—in other words, redefining the children themselves.

I have said that narratives (that of child innocence, for example) serve as moral guideposts, setting up binaries—right and wrong, good and evil, heroes and antiheroes—on which people draw to evaluate a given circumstance and decide what course of action to take. Given the definition of child innocence, counterprotesters faced an uphill battle in their attempts to place the minors within its parameters.

To be sure, as minors (and thus under the age of full legal responsibility) the young migrants were children in the eyes of the law. However, childlikeness, as discussed above, also carries cultural meanings, and what the young migrants had done to survive—leave their homes on their own, travel without adults to the border or in the company of other minors, cross into the United States—made their childlikeness suspect, since “real” children, their integrity intact, would not, could not, have endured the journey north. Without family and apparently homeless, they had survived and to some extent thrived (since they had made it to the United States) without adults. Given what they had done, why would they need the care and protection “real” children deserved?

In light of those realities, reframing the minors posed a difficult challenge. To begin, the struggle to determine which narrative best defined the young migrants made their identity a central point of contestation, adding complexity to an already volatile issue and moment. As importantly, the possibility that they could be one or the other, or both, rendered them ambiguous.

Generally conceived as unfinished and unrefined, bodies perceived as ambiguous carry multiple, even contradictory, meanings and provoke “confusion, or uncertainty” (Osterfield Li 2009; Sprague 2010:24). Likewise, as subjects who “transform or extend beyond the ordinary” (Osterfield Li, qtd. in Sprague 2010:24), they challenge the ordinary, and in that sense are generally considered destabilizing, if not subversive. In Escondido, the minors’ ambiguity placed them in a categorical limbo,
from which one side attempted to rescue them, while the other pushed
them into still more precarious margins. In either case, ambiguity de-
nied them personhood. Instead, it hyper-visualized them, transform-
ing them into what Jones describes as “anonymous and metaphorical”
odies as “spectacle”—innocent victims, according to one camp, crim-
inals, according to the other—either to be saved or banished (2011:74).
In the end, that ambiguity and the impasse it enabled did not last—
neither could the young Central Americans’ and Mexicans’ identity as
children.

The consequences were decisive. Their identity as children denied,
the minors were remanded to the racialized narrative of the threatening
immigrant and linked to threats to national sovereignty, security, and
identity. That turn effectively confirmed not only their “illegality” but the
illegitimacy of their plight and appeal for refuge, drowning out all pleas
for adult protection.

In the words of Kennedy and Craig, “in any given historic, social, and
political context, the legitimacy of pain is relative and ranges from legit-
imate pain (i.e., suffering seen as sympathy worthy) at one end . . . to the
far extreme, of illegitimate pain where individuals are stigmatized—often
to the point that their pain is viewed as ‘just punishment’” (2012:90). The
confirmation of the minors’ identity as immigrants allowed and justified
“native” moral and emotional distancing. It also normalized the plight
of the children and adolescents. That, in turn, diminished, if not erased,
their suffering in the eyes of those protesting the shelter. In the end, the
young Central Americans’ and Mexicans’ pain didn’t matter; they alone
were responsible for their suffering.

**Final Note**

Today, the future of children and adolescents migrating north looks un-
certain at best. Driven by interests of its own and pressure from the
United States, the Mexican government began to step up its pursuit
of undocumented Central Americans entering México. Apprehensions
had been growing steadily for some time, by approximately 13,000 a year
between 2011 and 2014; however, they jumped almost 350 percent between
2014 and 2015, continued to rise in 2016, and climbed steadily in 2017. In
the United States, apprehensions dropped between 2014 and 2015, began
to rise again in 2016, and grew steadily in 2017 (Kandel 2017; U.S. CBP 2016, 2018). They will most likely continue to grow so long as the causes driving the flight—poverty and societal violence, especially—continue to wreak havoc on these young people’s communities and families.

At the time of this writing, conditions in the United States do not offer much hope for unaccompanied youth. Public attitudes toward immigration reform and immigrants (especially if undocumented) reveal an entrenched hostility toward both. The results of the 2016 presidential election make any mention of immigration reform based on humanitarian principles almost impossible. Given those realities, migrant children will continue to be seen as suspicious ambiguous bodies at best and as dangerous bodies at worst, to be kept out of the United States.

NOTES

1. Recent years have witnessed a growing and often heated debate regarding how to refer to immigrants crossing into the United States without an appropriate legal document—whether to call them “undocumented” or “irregular,” for instance. While I acknowledge the implications of each term, I refrain from entering the discussion here and will refer to the immigrant children and adolescents, the subject of this essay, as undocumented.

2. The Department of Homeland Security, which includes U.S. Customs and Border Protection (U.S. CBP), uses “unaccompanied alien children,” or UAC, to refer to Central American and Mexican immigrant minors, the subject of this essay. I don’t use the term here, but it is the statistical category I referenced for this essay. The term “minor” in the United States is a legal demarcation referring to people not yet 18 years of age and so have not reached the age of full legal responsibility (except for gambling and alcohol consumption, for which they must be 21). It carries biological, sociocultural, political, and economic meanings as well, many of which have come under critical scrutiny in recent years (see González et al. 2012). I use “minor” here for the following reasons: it was the criteria U.S. CBP used to group a disparate assembly of young people already in immigration proceedings during the time period examined; it appeared, albeit alongside other terms, especially “children,” during the mobilizations in Escondido, and thus became contested ground and part of the dispute. The term appears in contemporary debates regarding newborns, children, and adolescents, if not youth in general. That said, I recognize the term’s limitations and the need to exercise caution when employing it.

3. Heeding Johnson’s observation that “the more we abstract” the more “we pay the price of losing connection with specific felt qualities of things,” throughout this essay I use the term “immigrants” whenever possible (with its emphasis
on people) instead of “immigration” and its allusions to social, political, and economic processes (Johnson 2007:93).

4. Mindful of the term’s underlying allusion to nativist and nativism, I use “native” in parentheses to refer to the residents of Escondido and to their sense of belonging to the city, region, and nation.

5. In this chapter I refrain from entering the discussion regarding what differentiates “emotion” from “feeling” from “affect,” a complex and lively debate in which there is much dissension (Spencer et al. 2012), especially with regard to unconscious attributes (Theodosius 2012:63–85). While no one disputes that emotion, feeling, and affect all have roots in the subconscious, there is little agreement as to which of the three is more or less conscious. As Feldman Barrett et al. argue, “the idea that emotion reflects a combination of conscious and unconscious processes dates back to the beginning of Western philosophy”; today “questions about the relationship between emotion and consciousness remain at the center of investigations (even if only to highlight that consciousness is not the defining feature of an emotional state)” (2005:1). Thus, while emotion is generally deemed more conscious than feeling and affect, the discussion is ongoing.

6. References to “kids” and “children” appeared to be a conscious decision on the part of counterprotesters, perhaps because “youth” and “juvenile” don’t carry the same sense of vulnerability and dependency as “child.” Also, “juvenile” is often associated with juvenile delinquents and juvenile hall and their connotations of criminal behavior and responsibility.

7. The ACLU contested the ban and the city repealed it, but resentment of the decision remained; the mayor of Escondido even accused the civil rights organization of “discrimination against the city” (Jones 2014d).

8. I am aware that this introduces a conscious intentionality, which may or may not have been the case. Both camps referenced the body, variously constructed (whether child, victim, predator, sexual aggressor), as conscious attempts to influence the decision against or in favor of building the shelter. That does not, however, necessarily imply a conscious reference of body, per se, for that purpose.

REFERENCES


**NEWSPAPER ARTICLES**


