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Migration and Invisibility in the Americas: The Importance of Non-State Actors Brokering Protection for People on the Move

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The 2021 MACLAS Arthur P. Whitaker Award-winning book, *The Invisibility Bargain: Governance Networks and Migrant Human Security*, is presented by the author at the 2022 conference of the Middle Atlantic Council of Latin American Studies (MACLAS) in New Jersey.

Migrants fleeing economic hardship or violence are entitled to a range of protections and rights under domestic and international law, yet they are often denied such protections in practice. In an era of mass migration and restrictive responses for Central Americans fleeing to Mexico and the United States, Colombians seeking refuge in Ecuador, and Venezuelans displaced to Colombia, Peru, and elsewhere, migrant acceptance is often contingent on the expectation that they contribute economically to the host country while remaining politically and socially invisible. These unwritten expectations, which Jeffrey D. Pugh calls the "invisibility bargain," produce a precarious status in which migrants' visible differences or overt political demands on the state may be met with hostile backlash from the host society. In this context, governance networks of state and non-state actors form an institutional web that can provide indirect access to rights, resources, and protection, but simultaneously help migrants avoid negative backlash against visible political activism. Based on the findings in his book, Pugh discusses the implications of migration for the Latin American region at a time when governments have closed borders and increased restrictions.

Keywords: Ecuador, Colombia, migration, integration, governance networks, invisibility

El libro ganador del Premio Arthur P. Whitaker de 2021, *The Invisibility Bargain: Governance Networks and Migrant Human Security*, es presentado por el autor

en la conferencia de 2022 del Middle Atlantic Council of Latin American Studies (MACLAS) en Nueva Jersey.

Los migrantes que huyen de las dificultades económicas o de la violencia tienen derecho a una serie de protecciones y derechos en virtud del derecho nacional e internacional, sin embargo, a menudo se les niegan tales protecciones en la práctica. En una era de migración masiva y respuestas restrictivas para los centroamericanos que huyen a México y los Estados Unidos, los colombianos que buscan refugio en Ecuador y los venezolanos desplazados a Colombia, Perú y otros lugares, la aceptación de los migrantes a menudo depende de la expectativa de que contribuyan económicamente al país de acogida mientras permanezcan política y socialmente invisibles. Estas expectativas no escritas, que Jeffrey D. Pugh llama el "acuerdo de invisibilidad", producen un estatus precario en el que las diferencias visibles de los migrantes o las abiertas demandas políticas al Estado pueden provocar una reacción hostil de la sociedad de acogida. En este contexto, las redes de gobernanza de actores estatales y no estatales forman una red institucional que puede proporcionar acceso indirecto a los derechos, recursos y protección, pero al mismo tiempo ayudar a los migrantes a evitar una reacción negativa contra el activismo político visible. Basado en los hallazgos de su libro, Pugh discute las implicaciones de la migración para la región latinoamericana en un momento en que los gobiernos han cerrado fronteras y aumentado las restricciones.

Palabras clave: Ecuador, Colombia, migración, integración, redes de gobernanza, invisibilidad

O livro vencedor do prêmio Arthur P. Whitaker de 2021 - *The Invisibility Bargain: Governance Networks and Migrant Human Security* - é apresentado pelo autor na Conferência de 2022 do Middle Atlantic Council of Latin American Studies (MACLAS) em Nova Jersey.

Migrantes que fogem de dificuldades econômicas ou violência têm direito a uma série de proteções e direitos sob a lei nacional e internacional, mas muitas vezes as proteções lhes são negadas na prática. Em uma era de migração em massa e respostas restritivas para os centro-americanos fugindo para o México e os Estados Unidos, colombianos em busca de refúgio no Equador e venezuelanos deslocados para a Colômbia, Peru e outros lugares, a aceitação de migrantes é muitas vezes dependente da expectativa de que eles contribuam economicamente para o país de acolhimento, mantendo-se política e socialmente invisíveis. Essas expectativas não escritas, que Jeffrey D. Pugh chama de "barganha da invisibilidade", produzem uma situação precária em que as diferenças visíveis dos migrantes ou suas demandas políticas abertas ao Estado podem receber uma reação hostil da sociedade anfitriã. Nesse contexto, as redes de governança de atores estatais e não estatais formam uma teia institucional que pode fornecer acesso indireto a direitos, recursos e proteção, e simultaneamente ajudar os migrantes a evitar uma reação negativa ao ativismo político visível. Com base nas descobertas de seu livro, Pugh discute as implicações da migração para a região latino-americana num momento em que governos estão fechando fronteiras e aumentando as restrições.

Palavras-chave: Equador, Colômbia, migração, integração, redes de governança, invisibilidade

Video of the full address is available online at <https://youtu.be/bFS5CYO50WM>.



Photo by Diane Johnson

Introduction

Good evening, and thank you so much for the invitation to share my book with you. I am honored to be here. I will try to provide some of the highlights without getting too heavily into the weeds of my data. I want to begin by providing some context on migration and human mobility in the world today.

International migrants represent 281 million people, or 3.6% of the world's population, according to the International Organization of Migration (IOM). The Global South hosts 85% of the world's refugees. Nearly half of all migration in general is *toward* the Global South, belying the conventional wisdom of nearly all migration from the Global South going to the Global North.

According to the 2022 IOM World Migration Report, "Over the past 15 years, the number of international migrants in Latin America and the Caribbean has more than doubled from around 7 million to 15 million, making it the region with the highest growth rate of international migrants" (24).

During much of the past twenty years, the major source of forced displacement in Latin America—both of international refugees and of internally displaced persons—

has been Colombia, and Ecuador has been the largest recipient of refugees and asylum seekers in region.

My book, *The Invisibility Bargain: Governance Networks and Migrant Human Security* (Oxford University Press, 2021), focuses on Colombian forced migrants in Ecuador. More recently, Venezuela has taken the lead as the largest source of displacement in the region, with a more complex and mixed group of migrants, many of whom do not fall neatly within the criteria of the 1951 Refugee Convention, making their integration and protection more difficult. I will talk today about some of the implications of my book's findings for today's new group of people on the move, Venezuelans.

I will tell you a little bit about the research I did over more than ten years to carry out this fieldwork, which included 170 interviews with migrants, NGOs, United Nations and state officials, and more than 650 surveys of Colombian migrants in six provinces in the northern border region of Ecuador. Although I use mixed methods in my book, including survey data analysis, qualitative case studies and participant observation, and network analysis, I am aware that this is an after-dinner talk, so I will follow the advice of the comedian Chevy Chase, playing the role of President Gerald Ford on *Saturday Night Live*, who showed up to a debate with tough questions and responded: "I was told there would be no math." I will push against my instincts as a political scientist and try to spare you the math tonight. Instead, I want to begin with a few stories, vignettes to give you a sense of the experiences I learned about in Ecuador that shaped this book.

Personal Stories and Vignettes

I was in Sucumbios, a jungle province, which is in the Amazon close to the border. I was talking to a former official of the Defensoría del Pueblo, or human rights ombuds office. He was telling me that there was a boy, about twelve years old, whom I will call Miguel (obviously all names will be changed in this talk for security reasons). His mother was part of a women's federation that had a meeting in a village near hers to learn sewing as a microenterprise project. While she was in the sewing workshop in the common area of the community, the kid went to play at a friend's house in a village at the edge of the placid waters of the Sucumbios River. At the same time, an Ecuadorian military patrol boat passed by the village on the river carrying out routine reconnaissance. They identified a suspected group of FARC guerrillas on the Colombian side and opened fire. In the chaos of the exchange, a stray bullet crashed through the window of the friend's house, striking Miguel in the head and killing him instantly.

Later, when investigators from the Defensoría del Pueblo attempted to find out what had happened, their questions were met with silence, with no witnesses volunteering to know anything or admitting to having seen anything. Their fear of retaliation from their own state was at least as great as their fear of the non-state violent actors on the other side of the river. In this case, the state's protection of its territorial borders from a foreign armed force—the classic understanding of national security—came at the direct expense of the *human* security, meaning individual freedom from fear and want, of Miguel and his friends.

This distinction between national and human security is an important one forming the basis for my book's analysis. In the hazy shadows and contested loyalties characterizing the transnational lives that many migrants are forced to live, the state is not the only, and sometimes not the preferred, source of protection. The dual role of the state as provider of protection and enforcer of laws, and their democratic political incentive to protect the interests of their citizens who vote, not the migrants who largely do not, mean that migrants can't necessarily rely on the state as the primary source of protection, and they have to diversify their sources of protection and assistance.

They quickly learn to adapt their expectations, treat the state with a degree of suspicion, and rely on an informal network of friends, compatriots, organizations, and churches, and even illicit service providers like *coyotes* or *chulqueros* (loan sharks). State incapacity or hostility at official border crossings often pushes people to more dangerous border routes called "*trochas*" (like in Figure 1 below), where they are exposed to illicit actors and potential violence. There is a whole ecosystem of service providers and security providers beyond the state, and I wanted to wade into those murky shadows and trace those stories, figuring out how they work and why they work.

Trochas



Figure 1: Trochas in Carchi Province

Even when they are not experiencing direct threats of violence, structures of exploitation and precarity are woven through the lives of many migrants. Their accent, language, skin color, facial features, religious practices, dress, and other markers of difference can situate them outside the “community of value” that is considered deserving of protection, care, and a voice in political decisions that affect their lives. They quickly learn to adapt to the expectations of the host community, reducing the visibility of their differences through withdrawal from social spaces or adapting their own practices to blend in. Colombians would tell me that they would try to lose their accent and speak more like Ecuadorians as a coping mechanism, really as a survival strategy.

I will talk in a little bit about the language that I use to describe this phenomenon, but what does this expectation of “social invisibility” look like in practice? Let me share a few stories to illustrate the way these expectations play out in people’s lives.

I met a Colombian empanada seller whom I will call Beatriz in a cramped kitchen just off a bustling street in Comité del Pueblo, a marginalized barrio at the extreme north of Quito that is one of the areas where refugees and migrants tend to congregate because it is one of the few places they can afford. Over the sizzling oil, golden fried dough, and delicious aroma of the empanadas she was preparing, which she invited

me to sample, she told me: "I stopped selling empanadas in the streets because I am afraid. The migration police would often come by, and if they hear a Colombian accent, they would ask to see our documents. The photocopy of my asylum-seeker document that I carry serves very little use. They often claim that these documents are fake and detain Colombians anyway. When I go out, I try to keep my mouth shut."

The marker of difference that sets Beatriz apart from Ecuadorians is her accent; they would not necessarily know she was Colombian until she opened her mouth. For others, it might be their skin color. There are more Afro-Colombians than there are Afro-Ecuadorians, so when people see a black person in Quito, they assume they are either from the coast or from Colombia, both of which are stigmatized and have social sanctions.

In other countries, it may be a hijab or speaking a foreign language. This racialized marker of social difference becomes a brand, marking them as other, as less deserving of protection or care, as someone who left their rights behind in their home country and is allowed into the host country by the generosity of the host society, for which they should be grateful and not make additional rights demands.

The cultural expression of Beatriz's foreignness also melds with stigmatized images in the media and the everyday understanding of Ecuadorians, providing a rationale for denying her care, housing, and the enforcement of labor or education laws, since she is assumed to be a member of what Marie Breen Smyth calls a "suspect community." She is the subject of what sociologists have called "social illegality," where undocumented status is assumed because of cultural or racial characteristics, and sometimes actively manufactured by states, making it impossible to follow the rules set out for proper reception and integration.

The result is a precarity that keeps migrants in the shadows, excluded from formal institutions, fearful of social interactions that could lead to death threats from those they are fleeing or incarceration and deportation from the authorities. It is a precarity that demands their labor and contributions to the host society but refuses them the ability to participate in decisions that affect their lives, or even from the full expression of their cultural identity if this is different from the majority norms of the host society.

I mentioned the greater percentage of Afro-Colombians, meaning that race becomes a marker of difference that is policed by this social invisibility boundary. I was in a focus group, and there were two Colombians—an Afro-Colombian woman named Lidia and a mestiza Colombian woman named Cassandra. Both were sharing stories, contrasting their experiences and reflecting on the backlash they faced, and

recognizing that they have in common the suspicions that come when people hear their Colombian accent.

But Lidia, the Afro-Colombian woman, began highlighting the degree to which the stakes are different, saying: "You came as a university student, not as a forced migrant; I had five minutes to flee after my family member was killed. My skin color marks me as visible. So, although the patterns of exclusion apply to both of us, marked by accent, the stakes are much higher in terms of the harm that people like me can experience as a result of that discrimination." So, you see intersectionality playing in here, where people's intersecting forms of difference multiply the kinds of challenges they have, whether that is an apartment rented to one of these women and not the other; attention drawn to the one with darker skin; a racist state agent refusing services to one; or even police targeting one or both for exploitation or sexual violence, which does occur.

The Invisibility Bargain

As I was hearing stories like this, I began to identify a pattern, which I call the invisibility bargain. I think in most host countries, there is a tacit understanding between the host society and migrants. Migrants are allowed to exist and not actively be chased out. Their presence is allowed as long as they follow certain unwritten, but widely understood and enforced, rules. They are expected to contribute economically with their labor or with some other valued service, for example, serving in the military. They are also expected to remain socially and politically invisible. I have talked a little already about the social invisibility expectation, but what do I mean by political invisibility? Here is another story from my field work in the northwest Pacific coast of Ecuador near the Colombian border.

With the lapping waves of the Pacific Ocean filling my ears, and a delicious plate of prawns and shrimp in front of me that he had harvested just hours before, a fisherman on the northwestern Ecuadorian coast learned what I was researching and mentioned that he had previously served as a local elected official on the *junta parroquial*, or town council, of his village. The conversation veered in a different direction as he gave me his perspective: "Colombians have started getting involved in politics, because they are smart and well prepared. Not too long ago, one even ran for prefect of Esmeraldas, despite being in this country for only five years or so. I think they are ungrateful, coming to our country, being welcomed, and then taking over. We as Ecuadorians are the ones who have the right to decide how we will be governed."

The narrative of a political takeover, or even an invasion through demographic change and cultural contamination, is a common reaction of fear and resentment

toward migrants, with echoes being heard across the region. Think about Dominicans looking fearfully at Haitians and using the language of a “peaceful invasion” through population change. Think about the attitudes of Costa Ricans toward Nicaraguans, Trinidadians toward Venezuelans, and this discourse is a nightly staple on Fox News, where fears of Mexicans in the United States are frequently stoked by including this language of political replacement. Social difference is not only a sign of otherness, but it is a marker of political threat to be vanquished and repelled, weaponizing the logic of national defense against the offending bodies of migrants seeking safety.

This can scale up, as it is not just an individual phenomenon. The idea that migrants engaged in political participation are threatening and ungrateful is widespread. There was a group of Afro-Colombian asylum seekers in Ecuador who had been denied third-country resettlement. They said that they were still getting death threats from the armed groups who originally threatened them. They were still being threatened in Quito, so they needed to move to a safer country. They asked the office of the UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees), which said it did not have a third country for them to go to, and they would need to settle locally. They didn’t like that answer and didn’t quite get that it is the state that makes decisions about refugees. So, they camped out in front of the UNHCR building, occupying the space with a cardboard box camp for more than a week. They had media attention, most of which was negative, with an infantilizing tone that dismissed their concerns and painted them as troublemakers potentially linked with nefarious actors. Ultimately, the police came and forced them to leave, clearing away their belongings.

A group of Cubans did something similar in Parque Ejido and El Arbolito in the colonial downtown of Quito. Not only did the police come to clear them out, but they were reassigned to what is called “Hotel Carrion,” which is an old hotel that has been converted into a detention center for migrants. It acts as a state of exception, where rules don’t apply, and no one knows what is happening. Suddenly in the middle of the night, a plane left Ecuador with over 100 Cubans, and due process went out the window. So, the idea of engaging in political participation to gain rights often sparks a backlash that makes things worse.

There is a symbolic effect. A Venezuelan man in the town of Ibarra, halfway between Quito and the northern border, killed his pregnant Ecuadorian girlfriend in front of news cameras and the police, and he was detained. After he did this, the Ecuadorian president Lenin Moreno circulated a tweet, saying that we will defend our sisters and mothers by restricting Venezuelan migration. He said he was authorizing brigades to “control” the Venezuelan problem in the streets and close the borders. These phrases were dog whistles to vigilantism. Mobs then attacked hostels in Ibarra where Venezuelans stayed, dragged their belongings out into the street and burned them, and then chased Venezuelans out of town with sticks and threatened their lives.

These are people who had nothing to do with the guy who killed his girlfriend, they were just other Venezuelans. So, you had from the highest levels of government this signaling of otherness, of violent stigmatization, giving the signal that any countermovement was against national security.

With all of this in mind, my argument is that states are accountable primarily to their citizens (who vote), not migrants (who do not). The invisibility bargain leads to precarity, gaps between the formal, positive institutions that Ecuador has, like the Constitution that prohibits discrimination based on nationality, and practice, where these protections are not always implemented in reality. In those gaps, non-state actors emerge, especially NGOs, the Catholic Church, UNHCR, and even informal networks. Because these actors serve as brokers, negotiating between migrants and the state, they are more trusted by migrants, and therefore have better access to migrants. But they also have the ear of the government and are able to convene meetings and talk to people. They act in this intermediary role that allows them to increase points of access for migrants seeking to gain rights, resources, recognition, and protection.

Governance Networks

When I tried to understand what factors were essential for migrants navigating the invisibility bargain and choosing to access human security with their host communities, two big patterns emerged. One was networked governance. This is the idea that there are access points to a “helping network” of state, UN, and non-state actors. When migrants first come into a community, they may only know a specific personal contact, or a migrant organization, or the church. Those groups may not have the resources to help directly, but they may often have relationships with other organizations, like the Defensoría del Pueblo, the mayor’s office, etc. They can provide references, or accompany the migrant to get help. So, the network structure means that once you access that first point of entry, the whole thing opens up. The places where migrants tended to have the best outcomes, and the greatest levels of protection and human security, tended to be the places with dense and diverse networks that coordinated with each other.

The more dense and diverse this network was in a particular locality, the more likely migrants would be able to find help and protection. Conventional wisdom assumes that state capacity and wealth lead to higher standards of living, and thus a better life for migrants, but in fact, the places with more state institutions and greater wealth—like Quito and Ibarra—were some of the places where migrants experienced greater discrimination, violence, and economic marginalization. In contrast, the poor border provinces in the Amazon jungle and coast had a history of binational families,

trade, crossborder existences, and migrants reported feeling more at ease. This networked effect seemed to be quite powerful.

In Lago Agrio in the jungle, the various migrant-serving organizations met weekly in a *mesa de movilidad*, discussing solutions to common problems, coordinating on specific cases, and developing advocacy strategies. This dense institutional network led to better referrals, often based on personal relationships and trust among organizations, and ultimately better outcomes for migrants. In other places where organizations worked in silos and political will for collective approaches was low, migrants often lived in greater precarity.

The implication here is that the state cannot and should not be the only game in town; it is an important part of the governance network, but by coordinating with and maintaining constructive working relationships with different sorts of organizations having diverse missions and interests, there are more possibilities of migrants finding an entry point to access rights, resources, and protection.

Contact Theory and Meaningful Interaction

The second big pattern that I identified was the power of personal interaction. Because prejudiced views and stigmatization of migrants often rely on stereotypes about a collective category based on limited information from the media, or passed along indirectly in conversations, the best weapon to overcome prejudice is to foster meaningful, positive personal relationships between migrants and members of the host community.

Building on a wealth of research on a psychological concept known as contact theory, I heard time and again that when Colombians were able to build meaningful friendships with Ecuadorians, this was often transformative. They learned about opportunities for jobs or assistance organizations that they would not have heard about from other Colombians; they learned informal cultural norms that helped them navigate their new surroundings; and the Ecuadorians came to know them as individuals, not as “that Colombian,” but as Juan, or Diego, who works at the *panadería* bakery and has two kids he is trying to feed. They had a more complete image in mind of what it means to be a Colombian, and it was much harder to keep in their mind these stigmatized images when they knew someone personally who didn’t fit them.

When I asked my Colombian interviewees if they knew an Ecuadorian personally, and if so, how frequently and where they interacted, I discovered that this made a world of difference for their views of Ecuadorians in general. I promised no math tonight, but here is the exception, a simple graph (in Figure 2 below); it is important.

Effect of interaction with Ecuadorians on Colombians' attitudes

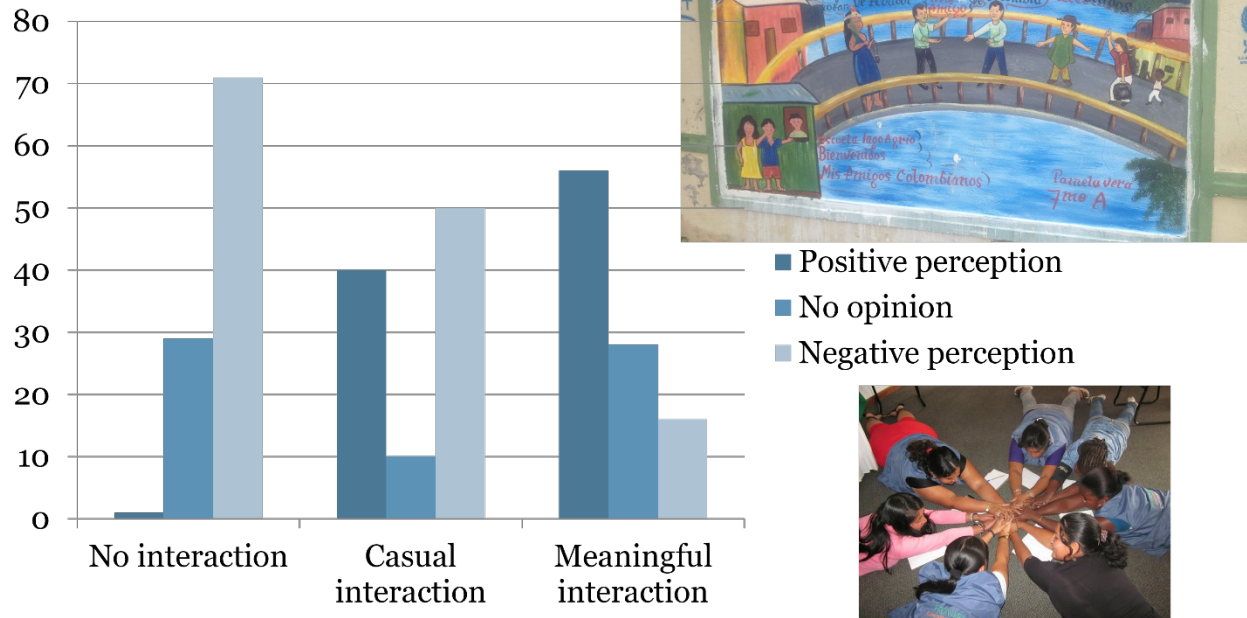


Figure 2: Interaction and perceptions of Ecuadorians by Colombians

I asked Colombians where they interacted with Ecuadorians most of the time, whether on the street, the market, the workplace, school, family, etc. Places like the street or the market counted as casual interaction, since you are not really getting to know them very well, just bumping into them. Meaningful interaction was in the family, workplace, and school. For those who had no interaction at all with the other group, the vast majority of them had a negative perception, more than 70%. No one had a positive perception of the other group who didn't have any interaction with them. For those who had meaningful interaction, more than half had a positive perception of the other group, and less than 20% had a negative perception. So, you can see a strong difference between those two. What is interesting is that casual interaction does not make the relationship inherently better. Instead, it reduces the category of "no opinion." Whatever you already thought, you believe even more. It intensifies your preexisting beliefs. Contact itself is not enough, it needs to be meaningful and positive.

The same pattern works in the other direction, and these relationships have the potential to transform the stigmatized views of the migrant other. The paradox,

though, is that even though meaningful social relationships with Ecuadorians make it more likely that Colombians will gain access to the governance network of help and find protection, the social invisibility expectation and their fear of backlash often push them away from seeking these relationships, like Beatriz and her empanadas, preferring to stay at home and keep quiet. There is an opportunity cost to being able to gain access to that governance network; it is a heartbreaking paradox. I think these are fascinating stories that I learned while doing this fieldwork.

Next Steps

The next steps in this project, now that the book is out, are two big directions:

First, I am comparing the experiences of *different* migrant groups in Ecuador to tease apart how group characteristics can cause them to experience elements of the invisibility bargain differently. I did a comparative survey of six different migrant groups in Quito, including Venezuelans, Colombians, Haitians, Cubans, Chinese, and returned Ecuadorian emigrants. I am trying to see what the differences are among the groups in how these patterns apply, and I am already seeing some interesting results.

Second, with support from the Russell Sage Foundation and in collaboration with the IVPARC (Immigrant Visibility and Political Activism Research Collaborative) research team, I am testing the invisibility bargain theory in the context of the United States, trying to assess how well it travels to other places. We have done a nationally representative survey of attitudes in the US, testing very rigorously, including with an embedded experiment, how well this framework travels to the US. We are also exploring what kinds of psychological and individual characteristics within members of the host society are likely to intensify or even reduce the negative backlash effects of the invisibility bargain, including the role of contact theory.

At this point, I would love to invite you into the conversation. For those interested in a deeper dive into the book, there are some copies available here and you are welcome to see me afterward. For those interested in learning about the next steps of the US stage of the study, check out IVPARC.com where you can see updates on the project being carried out by Providence College and UMass Boston. Thank you so much for the invitation to speak tonight, and I am so honored that my book was selected as the Whitaker Prize winner. I am happy now to open for questions and discussion.

Jeffrey Pugh is an associate professor of conflict resolution at the University of Massachusetts Boston and the executive director of the Center for Mediation, Peace, and Resolution of Conflict (CEMPROC), an NGO in Ecuador, as well as the co-PI of the Immigrant Visibility & Political Activism Research Collaborative (IVPARC). He received his PhD in political science from Johns Hopkins University. Pugh's research focuses on peacebuilding, migration, and non-state actors in the Global South. He has published scholarly articles, book chapters, and policy reports, and his book, *The Invisibility Bargain: Governance Networks and Migrant Human Security* (Oxford University Press, 2021), examines the integration, political participation, and access to human security of Colombian migrants in Ecuador. His current research agenda through IVPARC applies the human security framework to immigrant activism in the United States. His research has received more than ten awards, from the American Political Science Association, the International Studies Association, and others, and he was a 2014–15 Fulbright Scholar affiliated with FLACSO Ecuador. Pugh teaches graduate courses on Negotiation, Immigration & Conflict, Human Security, and Theories of Peace and Conflict, among others. He is a cofounder of the Regional Institute on Nonviolent Action in the Americas, and he is a past president of the Middle Atlantic Council of Latin American Studies (MACLAS).
