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Militarized Vulnerabilities: The Minutemen, Exemplary Citizenship And Moral Masculinity

The border is as much as performance staging national boundaries and state authority, as it is a material boundary.ⁱ The anti-immigration groups that I collectively refer to as the Minutemen (MM) have also publicly described their sensationalist monitoring of the border and labor sites as a form of political theater. When the Minutemen Civil Defense Corps, led by Chris Simcox, constructs a border fence on private land, or the San Diego Minutemen inspired by director Jim Gilchrist “observe” labor sites, they claim that they are “shocking” us into attention about the illegal immigration “state of emergency”ⁱⁱ and the inadequacies of national policy.ⁱⁱⁱ This paper examines how these groups use a sensational, theatrical repertoire of tactics to update abstracted ideals of citizenship with more emotional and political purchase.

→ SLIDE: “DON”T TREAD ON ME”

It costs 50 dollars to register with the Arizona-based Minutemen Civil Defense Corps, or CDC, but that fee will be waived for any applicant who can prove that they have a License to Carry a Concealed Weapon.^{iv} CDC’s Training Manual, however, stipulates that volunteers’ firearms must always be empty and holstered, and only wielded in self-defense.^{vi} Early armed Minutemen operations used these weapons when making citizen’s arrests, which are permitted when, in this case undocumented migrants, are “disturbing the peace” by inciting violence or making the community fearful of it. When combined with the Minutemen’s purported “monitoring” of the southern border and undocumented migrant labor sites, these membership waivers, weapon edicts and citizen’s arrest statutes becomes props. They allow the MM to compose undocumented

immigrants as criminal and violent, and the nation as both threatened and powerfully inured to that exposure. In turn, these vigilante groups construct themselves as both exposed and invulnerable, at risk and hostile – a kind of double performance.

[EXAMINE RATTLESNAKE SLIDE] The rattlesnake in this Minutemen logo expresses this duality. Migrants who supposedly cross the border with such ease and freedom threaten the snake, potentially treading upon it: But the MM are also armed with potentially lethal defense mechanisms in response to this danger – and their border actions are supposed to be a rattle warning us of this impending violence.

These groups often conflate drug trafficking with more labor-oriented migration, a convenient slippage that allows them to characterize all migrants as dangerous. But is the MM who are armed and prone to violence. And by merely showing up to the border, monitoring it with their unchambered pistols, they can claim that undocumented migrants are creating a climate of fear and incite a self-defensive violence. Consequently, the Minutemen compose themselves as threatened and in need of self-protecting weapons and policies. They simultaneously displace their own aggression onto migrants, inverting the structural power dynamics underlying producing some groups as more vulnerable than others. In turn, the migrants are resignified as dangerous “illegals”, permitting their criminalization, detention and sometimes shooting.^{vii}

→ SLIDE: “BORDER FENCE” and “AZTLAN”

Performative strategies like these are central to the Minutemen’s rhetorical and activist repertoires. In particular, they stage the inadequacies of the government and

immigration policy by acting out their vision of the proper relation between the government, citizens, and migrants.^{viii} The Civil Defense Corps started to build a border fence on donated, private land to in their words, “demonstrate the feasibility of security at the border”^{ix} in response to its “chaotic neglect”^x by the government.

[EXAMINE AZTLAN SLIDE] The Minutemen envision a dystopic future where the western states are repatriated to Aztlan.^{xi}

Because nothing less than the “colonization” and fragmentation of a cohesive - really nativist - national culture is supposed to be at stake, the Minutemen emphasize the state’s moral failure to protect its citizenry. In this narrative, the Minutemen stand in as ideal Citizens, fulfilling the duties the state neglects, and thus shaming it into action.

The state is constructed as lackadaisical and bloated on the comfort and ease of multicultural diversity. It has become unguarded, “indecisive” and “quiver[ing]”, exposing itself to threats.^{xii} This vulnerability is implicitly gendered as soft, marking the nation as feminine and out-of-shape. She is easily penetrated by invading migrants’ alien ways. And in this apocalyptic narrative, Americans are being “bred out” by a form of stealth cultural terrorism. As Gilchrist notes, “Without intervention by the people who comprise the very fabric of this country, [we’ll] inherit a tangle of rancorous, unassimilated, squabbling cultures with no cohesive bond[. This is a] certain guarantee of the death of this nation as a harmonious ‘melting pot’.”^{xiii} He also warns that the United States is on the verge of becoming the next post-Soviet Union.^{xiv} Conservative fears of identity politics and multiculturalism are ghosts haunting these warnings of impending cultural balkanization. Indeed they and the welfare state are blamed for feminizing the nation, rendering it vulnerable.

→ SLIDE – “TO HAVE AND TO HOLD” AND “FREEDOM RALLIES”

Pop-histories celebrate the original Minutemen for combating against odds the despotism of the British. Their anti-immigration heirs strategically remember and update these pop histories for the 21st century to create an emotional purchase centered primarily on sentimentality.

→ We see in these slides how these pop-histories are invoked in nostalgic longing for a fantasized, harmonious lost time. Note the Native American Scout front and center in this fantasy of the Revolutionary War.

The contemporary Minutemen easily sublimate this sense of loss into anger over our current state of national vulnerability. The state is both neglectful and tyrannical in its support for social welfare and affirmative action programs that are blamed for attracting migrants into the country.

This composition relies upon manipulating and mobilizing the emotional ambivalence accompanying vulnerability. For while it can incite the compassionate desire to protect, vulnerability can also cue disgust, empathy's repressed other that returns to accompany the depiction of the nation as at risk. This revulsion retrofits nativist and eugenics-oriented rhetoric for the current era, and channels them towards undocumented migrants. This revulsion is reinforced by many Minutemen's contentions that they feel like strangers in their own country: The language, culture, and whiteness they expect to be taken for granted is marked for the first time, and perceived to be threatened. Indeed, if *ressentiment* is the repeated remembering of systemic subordination accompanying difference, this more conservative valence – shall we call it just plain resentment - mobilizes more privileged groups because they are feeling the pain of being marked by racial, gendered, and ethnic identities, presumably for the first time. This remarking, or remembering, is experienced as traumatic, leading to an explosive sense of

resentment that partly explains the rank-and-file Minutemen's violent and goading behavior toward migrants, as well as counter-protestors.

→ SLIDE: "US CONSTITUTION ENFORCEMENT"

Of course, this violence is concealed by the group's discursive positioning of themselves as Exemplar Citizens; a continually vigilant militia dutifully upholding the purest ideals of Country, Constitution and Citizenship that the state neglects.^{xv}

→ SLIDE: GILCHRIST

A militarized masculinity is licensed as the ideal mode of this protectionism, emblemized by founders such as Jim Gilchrist policing the borders in the name of the People and the Constitution. Minutemen literature frequently refers to the volunteers' "vigilance," "duty," "self-restraint," "objectivity," and "resoluteness" - all historically gendered as male. When combined with military-esque clothing and technology, these characteristics emphasize on discipline and hierarchy signals the militarization of this masculinity. In turn, invulnerability and citizenship themselves are cast as masculine, militarized, and predominantly white - although there are many more complicated racial and ethnic valences that I cannot unpack here. Refusing the penetration of the invading alien, it also codes itself as heterosexual.

Consequently, they performatively embody what invulnerability looks like, in Butler's original definition of performativity as a NORMATIVE function that transmits force by reiterating dominant sets of practices.^{xvi} Because it retains normative practices by repeating them, performativity functions most frequently as a conservative force.^{xvii}

→ SLIDE: “UNCLE SAM”

Simultaneously, the MM are also mobilizing a more subversive form of performativity – albeit to conservative ends. The law is presumably sovereign in MM discourse, all their actions are justified in their commitment to bring its exercise in line with its imagined ideals. But by acting as exemplary citizens who represent and are role models for all American people, they also threaten to displace the state if it continues to shirk its duty. Their border actions and performance activisms become dress rehearsals for a purer, future government composed quite literally of the people by the people.

→ In this slide the MM occupy the authority of Uncle Sam, a nationalist icon that is transformed into a placeholder for the people exercising the weight of state power.

→ SLIDE: “LADIES WELCOME” AND “HIGH HEELS ON THE BORDER”

They also license a very particular image of femininity. The Minutemen Project emphasizes that it actively recruits women, but yet there is a retention of essentialized feminine roles and signifiers that might be a redeployment of a new maternal feminist politics. In one Minutemen American Defense photomontage there are a series of photographs featuring a woman monitoring the border in heels and polished toes, as well as washing her hair. Another volunteer mentioned that she “is not wearing a gun but a crochet needle and thread”.^{xviii} If vulnerability is otherwise feminized and denigrated by the MM, and has no place in the nationalist anatomy, here that association is mitigated as long as these women retain feminine signifiers as they act in a supportive capacity. Indeed their gender functions as an alibi reaffirming the MM thin pretense toward being a multicultural, diverse organization supporting a presumably universal message supporting the rights of all citizen’s. They are a kind of women’s auxiliary, perhaps a nativist feminism? In any case, their militarized gender is supposed to throw into relief

how the nation is being a pussy, lounging in the afterglow of multiculturalism and gorging on the simple carbohydrates of consumer capitalism.

The MM's performance activism warn against this indolence. It demonstrates how sensationalism can bring deeply ingrained cultural mythologies to the surface, drawing from them an emotional response that has considerable meaning-making, and policy-making, power. In particular, they demonstrate how the emotional ambivalence accompanying vulnerability – the incitement of compassionate protectionism and revulsion - can be manipulated for anti-democratic ends in the name of democracy.

→SLIDE: “CAUTION”

ENDNOTES AND PRINTED WORKS CITED

- American Civil Liberties Union - Arizona, N. M., Texas (2006). *Creating the Minutemen: A Misinformation Campaign Fueled by a Small Group of Extremists*, American Civil Liberties Union.
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ⁱ Andreas, P. (2000). *Border Games: Policing the U.S.-Mexico Divide* Ithaca, Cornell University Press. X, 7, 144.

ⁱⁱ In 2005, the apex of Minutemen operations and national press attention, the governors of both New Mexico and Arizona declares a state of emergency due to illegal immigration. It was quickly absorbed into the Minutemen's rhetoric.

ⁱⁱⁱ Both Chris Simcox and James Gilchrist, organizers of the CDC and the Minuteman Project, respectively, refer to their operations "a dog and pony show" and "shock and awe". See Gilchrist quoted in Thomas, S. M. (2008). *The Minuteman Reconsidered. Orange Coast*. 4. Accessed on 1/14/2009 at <http://www.orangecoastmagazine.com/site/pp.asp?c=ahKQL8NTE&b=3854793> and Simcox, Chris. "Standard Operating Procedure for the Minutemen Civil Defense Corps" pg 3. Accessed on 10/06/08 at <http://www.minutemanhg.com/hg.sop.php>

^{iv} See Minutemen Civil Defense Corps donation form. Accessed 10/06/08

^v Concealed weapons permits usually requires a background check and fingerprinting, among other criteria. Only Alaska and Vermont do not require a permit for carrying a concealed weapon. .

^{vi} Simcox, "Standard Operating Procedure", pg 4.

^{vii} Border guards shot in the buttocks an unarmed undocumented man fleeing away from an abandoned load of Marijuana across the Rio Grande and back into Mexico.

^{viii} Social movement scholars dub these "prefigurative" tactics. Gamson, W. (1992). *The Social Psychology of Collective Action. Frontiers in Social Movement Theory*. A. D. Morris and C. McClurg Mueller. New Haven, Yale University Press.

^{ix} Simcox, "Minuteman Civil Defense Corps Border Fence".

^x Simcox, "Minuteman Civil Defense Corps Donation Form"

^{xi} They also frequently foretell of the impending formation of a totalitarian "North American Union" where citizenship, voting rights and democracy will be effectively abolished.

^{xii} The nation is also "sedate[ed into a] non-thinking bliss". Gilchrist, J. (2008). "An Essay by Jim Gilchrist" 22 *Geo. Immigr. L.J.* 415 (Spring). Accessed here on January 12, 2009 at: <http://www.minutemanproject.com/newsmanager/templates/mmp.asp?articleid=481&zoneid=24>., pgs 12, 12, 7.

^{xiii} *Ibid*, 12.

^{xiv} *Ibid*, 6.

^{xv} They frequently remark upon the personal responsibility and duty to, as the CDC mission says, "challenge our government to fulfill their constitutionally mandated responsibility...by fulfilling their obligation in their absence...to become force multipliers in the absence of Congressional and Presidential will." Simcox, "Minutemen Civil Defense Corps: Mission Statement"

^{xvi} Butler, J. (1993). "Critically Queer." *Gay and Lesbian Quarterly* 1: 17-32. 19.

^{xvii} This valence is particularly evident in the repetition of a militarized masculinity, pop-histories of great wars such as the revolution, and more complicated remembering of failed wars such as Vietnam.

^{xviii} American Civil Liberties Union - Arizona, N. M., Texas (2006). *Creating the Minutemen: A Misinformation Campaign Fueled by a Small Group of Extremists*, American Civil Liberties Union.