

UCLA

American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title

Unsettled Borders: The Militarized Science of Surveillance on Sacred
Indigenous Land

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6gq6067q>

Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 46(3)

ISSN

0161-6463

Author

Painter, Fantasia

Publication Date

2023-11-06

DOI

10.17953/A3.2578

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons
Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

Unsettled Borders: The Militarized Science of Surveillance on Sacred Indigenous Land. By Felicity Amaya Schaeffer. Durham: Duke University Press, 2022. 224 pages. \$99.95 cloth; \$25.95 paper; \$25.95 electronic.

Unsettled Borders constitutes a timely and rich contribution to Native American and Indigenous studies. The text opens with author Felicity Amaya Schaeffer's recent realization that Native Americans are absented from Latinx immigration and border studies, which she identifies as her intellectual home and audience. Calling in her own discipline, starting (and ending) with the great Gloria Anzaldúa herself, Schaeffer writes, "Given that scholarship, media, and films on immigration and borders focus on the brutal journey of border-crossers, we have failed to also account for the challenges faced by Native Americans" (3).

Compelled by this sweeping critique, the project and argument of the text cohere around three well-balanced throughlines: 1) the development networks of automated border surveillance technology, primarily in Arizona; 2) the settler colonial logics and aspirations driving automated border technology development; and 3) the living Native people and peoples affected by these persisting logics and emerging technologies.

Moving quickly from site to site, *Unsettling Borders* adumbrates a network of entities and individuals developing, testing, and deploying automated border surveillance technology. The text opens in Fort Huachuca, "a national hub for testing and development of electronic warfare and border-surveillance technologies" (42). It transports readers to the Tohono O'odham Nation, where integrated fixed towers (IFTs) enable US Border Patrol agents to surveil reservation land from afar (chapter 2), and to the University of Arizona, where researchers Jay Nunamaker and Judee Burgoon worked to produce the first fully automated border agent (chapter 3).

While centered in Arizona, *Unsettling Borders* follows the network to the halls of Harvard, where Radhika Nagpal created robotic bee swarms; to the occupied territories of Palestine, where the IFTs deployed on the Tohono O'odham Nation were developed; and into the pockets of the Department of Homeland Security and the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency, who fund these efforts. Moving through this capacious network, *Unsettling Borders* enriches and expands upon the classics of US-Mexico border militarization by scholars like Timothy Dunn and Joseph Nevins.

The groundbreaking work of the text shines through in its analysis of the settler colonial logics driving automated border technology, which is strongest and most explicit in chapters 1 and 3. In chapter 1, Schaeffer demonstrates how the US military presents Apache seeing and tracking skills (which Schaeffer calls "nativision" and which confounded officials during the Apache Wars) as the start of a tech teleology which culminates in today's unmanned drones that provide automated universal views.

Unconvinced by this settler narrative spin, Schaeffer turns to primary texts by Lieutenant Arthur L. Wagner and General Nelson M. Miles, arguing, “Apache tracking intelligence was not prior to but actually foundational to remote technologies” (35). US officials were fascinated by and fixated on Apache skills, and they have since worked hard to emulate, incorporate, and perfect them.

The Apache scout of the settler imagination—skilled, vigilant, all-seeing, never tired—is ostensibly perfected in automated border security technology like AVATAR (Automated Virtual Agent for Truth Assessments in Real Time), a virtual and automated border agent with more than fifty biometric sensors that render any border crosser’s body into data. Posing verbal questions while looking for “preverbal” answers, AVATAR captures, analyzes, and archives the physiological movements and behaviors “leaking” out of the body (chapter 3), and ultimately it evaluates whether or not individuals are hiding their true intentions or identity, whether or not they are lying, whether or not they pose a “security risk.” Schaeffer’s discussion of AVATAR is unsettling and constitutes an important engagement in and contribution to scholarship on techno-governance and biopolitics (by authors such as Andrea Miller and Jasbir Puar) and on colonial borders (by scholars like Jodi Byrd and María Josefina Saldaña-Portillo).

Extractive settler logics also appear in the aspiration to mine and mimic the natural world in automated border surveillance technologies. What began as a fascination with Apache knowledge and skills—knowledge and skills that officials categorically misunderstood as simultaneously supernatural and primitive vision—today manifests in the military interest in swarms and swarm intelligence, Schaeffer argues (chapter 4). Tracing a fascination with bee intelligence through the works of Charles Darwin and Ludwig Büchner, Schaeffer asserts that at the heart is a settler misunderstanding about life, one rife with racialized, anti-indigenous, and hierarchical logics. Schaeffer is careful here to explicitly separate herself from the ontological turn condemned by Indigenous studies scholar Zoe Todd.

As Schaeffer artfully exposes the settler imaginaries driving automated border enforcement technology development, she keeps a steady eye on living Native people. Throughout its chapters, *Unsettled Borders* invites readers to consider the border from the perspectives of Apache, Tohono O’odham, and Yucatec Maya. As the use of the exonym “Apache” might suggest, the treatment of those groups is uneven. There is a passing reference to Apache land, a full chapter dedicated to the occupation of the Tohono O’odham Nation by the Border Patrol (chapter 2), and a thorough investigation of the reclamation of traditional beekeeping by Yucatec Maya (chapter 4).

In chapter 4, Schaeffer fleshes out her concept “sacredscience,” a counterpoint to settler colonial technoscientific logics and worldviews and a space of liberating decolonial potential. Schaeffer’s “sacredscience” is rooted in Chicano studies; it builds from Anzaldúa’s unpublished work. And while Schaeffer’s exploration of the concept is beautiful *and* beautifully written, Indigenous studies scholars (me) may be a little salty that, in terms of the structure of the narrative, she moves to recover a futurity for Yucatec Maya, but much less so for Apache and O’odham. O’odham are presented as under threat of extinction (70) and destruction (150). In the conclusion, *Unsettled*

Borders returns to O'odham land, merely juxtaposing a discussion of the importance of the saguaro cactus to O'odham life with a photo of a dead cactus. In this sense and others, as David Martinez has written in his review of the text in the North American Congress on Latin America Report on the Americas, "her efforts to assume an Indigenous point of view fall short." That is, there is still work to be done.

Overall, *Unsettled Borders* successfully crafts new spaces of solidarity. It is theoretically nuanced, data-rich, and artfully executed. It constitutes a welcome and important addition to scholarship on the Indigenous US-Mexico border and makes important contributions to an incipient wave of scholarship—heralded by scholars such as David Martinez, Christina Leza, and Holy Miowak Guise, among others—that reexamines and theorizes on global borders and boundaries by centering Indigenous people, peoples, and territories.

Fantasia Painter

University of California, Irvine