

Popular sovereignty on the border: Nativist activism among two border watch groups in southern Arizona

Ethnography

2015, Vol. 16(4) 438–462

© The Author(s) 2014

Reprints and permissions:

sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav

DOI: 10.1177/1466138114552951

eth.sagepub.com**Emine F. Elcioglu**

University of California Berkeley, USA

Abstract

By drawing on ethnographic fieldwork with two grassroots groups that operate near the Arizona-Mexico border, this article illuminates how nativism is translated into day-to-day activism, often in ways that, while openly critical of the state, actually serve to strengthen the state. In contrast to conventional accounts that characterize nativist groups on the border as ‘vigilante’, I argue that the two groups which are the focus of this study, the Soldiers and the Engineers, seek to collaborate with state actors in an effort to restore the state’s exercise of what these groups consider to be legitimate violence in the borderlands. That is, the two groups enact nativism through *popular sovereignty*. Believing that the state’s ‘absence’ on the border is the result of an understaffed Border Patrol, the Soldiers fashion themselves into a civilian extension of the agency, taking pride in collaborating with locally stationed agents. Meanwhile, the Engineers find their entry point to the state through the ‘border security industrial complex’, hoping to work as private contractors for the Department of Homeland Security to restructure border surveillance. I conclude that we might expect popular sovereignty in other contexts where the state is perceived to be weak.

Keywords

nativism, border watch groups, immigration restrictionism, popular sovereignty, Minutemen, privatization, border security industry, border patrol, Arizona

On any given day of the year, the Soldiers and the Engineers,¹ two grassroots nativist organizations, engage in popular sovereignty, or a set of practices to help the state ‘reclaim control’ over the Arizona-Mexico border.

Corresponding author:

Emine F. Elcioglu, Department of Sociology, 410 Barrows Hall, University of California Berkeley, Berkeley, CA 94720, USA.

Email: fidan@berkeley.edu

The Soldiers are a Minutemen-like group: they take to the borderlands clad in militaristic outfits reminiscent of Border Patrol uniforms and armed with assault rifles. At a local ranch near the US-Mexico boundary, the group patrols thousands of acres of rough desert terrain, enduring the extreme heat of day and freezing cold of night. The Soldiers give weekly reports about migrant trails to the locally stationed Border Patrol, in order to help an agency that they believe is understaffed. The Engineers, by contrast, do not collaborate with Border Patrol; in fact, the group's relationship with the locally-stationed agents has deteriorated over the years. Rather, the Engineers have found another point of entry to shore up the state's apparently inadequate efforts: as a potential contractor for the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). From a ranch that they use as a laboratory, the Engineers scrutinize the Border Patrol's methods, assemble new technologies, and test them in hopes of redesigning the way the state conducts surveillance on the borderlands.

That nativist anxiety expressed at the US-Mexico border has been widely documented (Nevins, 2002; Chavez, 2013; Neiwert, 2013). Far more limited, however, is our understanding of how we should conceptualize the relationship between these groups and the state; how this nativism is translated into day-to-day activism; and how different nativist grassroots groups' practices compare. This is the topic of the current study.

In contrast to many conventional accounts of nativist mobilization on the border (Navarro, 2008; Massey and Sanchez R, 2010; Neiwert 2013), I argue that the Soldiers and the Engineers are neither 'vigilante' nor anti-state organizations. Despite being very critical of the state, both groups enact nativism through state-building projects. According to the Soldiers and the Engineers, even though the federal government claims that the nation's southern border is more secure than ever before, the unauthorized flows of goods and bodies speak to the contrary. For these two groups, the US-Mexico border represents a vulnerable extremity, where the state has abdicated authority. In response to this 'crisis', the Soldiers and Engineers, as they put it, 'do what the feds won't do'. That is, as non-state actors, these groups engage in *popular sovereignty*, or sets of practices aimed at complementing and correcting the state in hopes of restoring its capacity to legitimately use physical force, in this case, over the borderlands.

Ethnographic comparison of the Soldiers and the Engineers demonstrates how, despite their similar worldviews, nativist organizations fashion themselves into extensions of the state in different ways. On the one hand, the Soldiers pride themselves on cultivating good relations with the Border Patrol because they want to collaborate with the agency. Through a system of patrolling and documenting a locality, group members take it upon themselves to serve as the agency's extra eyes and ears. On the other hand, the Engineers find the Border Patrol agency's practices lacking, and see themselves as developers of more effective border surveillance strategies. Rather than collaborating with the agency, the Engineers set their sights on becoming a 'border security' contractor for the DHS. Thus, this study illustrates how nativism can be linked to state-building in disparate ways.

The remainder of this article is structured in the following manner. First, I provide an overview of how previous research has described nativist organizations and characterized their relationships to the state. This is followed by a brief discussion of the geopolitical role that southern Arizona has played in the process of border build-up, and how this context has nurtured nativist activism expressed through popular sovereignty. Then, I discuss data collection methods and provide a brief background of the two border watch groups that are the focus of this study. Afterwards, I show how the Soldiers model themselves after Border Patrol in order to 'protect' a local ranch, while the Engineers use their ranch as a laboratory for developing a system of surveillance to rival that of the agency. In conclusion, I suggest several areas of further research in the study of nativist mobilization and, more generally, of popular sovereignty.

Theories of nativist activism and the state

Most studies about recent expressions of hostility towards migrants in the US have adopted a trickle-down model of nativism. According to this model, the state engages in racist, exclusionary discourses and practices which non-state actors – like immigration restrictionist grassroots groups – absorb and perpetuate (Massey and Sanchez R, 2010; Kil et al., 2009; Navarro, 2008; Nevins, 2002, 2008; De Genova, 2005; Massey et al., 2002). In particular, scholars have placed tremendous weight on the expressive and symbolic effects of laws and legal codes (De Genova, 2005; Bosniak, 2008; Newton, 2008; Ngai, 2003; Calavita, 1996). For instance, immigration laws since 1965 have not only placed severe restrictions on 'legal' migration from Mexico; this 'inclusion through illegality' (Coutin, 2000) or 'legal production of Mexican/migrant illegality' has also naturalized Mexican migrants' 'illegality' and created a racialized association between Mexican-ness and 'illegal alien' (De Genova, 2005). Similarly, the state's targeting of the US-Mexico borderlands for militarized enforcement has obscured the dynamics of the transnational labor market and perpetuated a 'nostalgic' myth that 'borders once constituted effective shelter' (Andreas, 2001: 142). The resulting 'border spectacle' has naturalized 'illegality' further (De Genova, 2005; Nevins, 2002). These accounts all take the state – in particular its laws – as the main unit of analysis. As such, nativism is understood to trickle down from the legislator's pen into the institutions of civil society.

Such accounts of nativism, however, have two important limitations. First, because this scholarship sees the state as the primary source of exclusionary politics, it presumes rather than investigates grassroots restrictionist activism. As such, this approach forecloses the study of how the state's frameworks, and specifically how 'governing immigration through crime' (Inda, 2008; Dowling and Inda, 2013), is actually interpreted and acted upon by activists on the ground. There is also a second limitation to the top-down model of nativism. Because this approach precludes any close examination of activists' micropractices, it has led to analytically misleading appraisals of border watch groups and their relationship to the state.

For example, some have referred to nativist group mobilization as instances of ‘anti-immigrant hysteria’ (Massey and Sanchez R, 2010: 70) and to border watch organizations as ‘vigilante’ groups (Massey and Sanchez R, 2010: 70–1; Navarro, 2008; Neiwert, 2013). Terms like ‘hysteria’ and ‘vigilantism’, however, suggest that nativist groups operate at the fringes of society and have no relationship with the state or mainstream politics. The current study shows, however, that unlike other groups on the far right, such as the Sovereign Citizen Movement² (Fleishman, 2004), the Soldiers and the Engineers try to cultivate collaborative relationships with different parts of the state – Border Patrol, DHS officials, and local politicians – in an effort to bolster it.

Meanwhile, studies of the Minutemen movement (Chavez, 2013; Eastman, 2012; Johnson, 2011; Oliviero, 2011), particularly ethnographic ones that describe in detail the practices of the rank-and-file members (Doty, 2009; Shapira, 2013), depart from the tendency to take the state as the main object of study when trying to understand nativist mobilization. Buoyed by vast media attention, the Minuteman Project was a civilian border watch group that first emerged in southern Arizona in April 2005. Roxanne Lynn Doty’s (2009) ethnographic data on the Minutemen is very limited; nonetheless, she offers the useful term ‘popular sovereignty’ as a helpful way to begin to conceptualize the state’s relationship to nativist activism. She suggests that the Minutemen tried to get the state to be more sovereign by perpetuating the socially constructed distinction between the citizen and the undocumented Other. Her analysis, however, collapses back into a conventional account of Minutemen activism as ‘extra-legal’ (2009: 15) and ‘vigilante’ (2009: 14, 23, 101–2).

Harel Shapira’s (2013) ethnographic study is more illustrative of what the Minutemen’s actual day-to-day practices were and what meanings they drew from them. Shapira argues that the Minutemen’s politics, ostensibly devised to accomplish exclusion, really revolved about the sense of inclusion it afforded the Minutemen themselves. That is, the Minutemen’s discussions of ‘José’ – the undocumented Other – were really musings about how the Minutemen themselves fit into a changing world. These aging men used the border as a ‘resource for restoring conditions of life that they have struggled to maintain: soldiering, securing the nation, protecting family members, and establishing masculine camaraderie’ (2013: 152). However, while Shapira provides a compelling account of the social world that the Minutemen created, his analysis does not explain what about the border – as opposed to any another political, social, and geographic space – and specifically, what about the state’s relationship to the border, transformed it into this kind of ‘resource’ which motivated and provided the material for the Minutemen’s activism.

To address these gaps, this study attends to the meaningful practices of two nativist organizations based out of Southern Arizona. It does so, however, without losing sight of the state and the politics of the US-Mexico border. I borrow Doty’s term, ‘popular sovereignty’ and redefine it to mean non-state actors’ efforts to restore the state’s monopoly over the legitimate use of violence, when they perceive

the state to be absent or weak. By analyzing the two groups' micropractices through the prism of popular sovereignty, the study demonstrates how the Soldiers and the Engineers translated their nativism into a state-building effort. To anchor this ethnographic data, the next section discusses the geopolitical significance of southern Arizona for immigration control, as well as how this setting has fostered the perception that the state is weak.

Popular sovereignty on the border

Since the late 1970s and with increasing momentum in the 1990s, the US-Mexico border has undergone unprecedented militarization to become one of the most heavily fortified land-crossings in the world today (Dunn, 1997; Nevins, 2002; Miller, 2014). Paradoxically, however, that fortification has been accompanied by a widespread perception that state presence in the border region is weak.

In large part, this paradox can be explained by the particular geopolitical role that Arizona has played in the process of border buildup. In 1993, the Immigration and Naturalization Services (INS) developed a program called 'prevention through deterrence'. This initiative called for the deployment of border enforcement resources in popular, urban points of entry, with the expectation that rural, isolated and rougher terrain would serve as a natural barrier. Instead of deterring undocumented entry, however, this strategy has funneled flows of migrants through Arizona's Sonora Desert (Andreas, 2001; Nevins, 2002; Cornelius, 2005). Three years after the program went into effect, Congress passed the Anti-Terrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act and the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act. Among other changes, these two laws expanded the grounds for deportation to include a broad range of minor offenses and, importantly, criminalized illegal re-entry (Golash-Boza 2012). As a result of these developments, Arizona has become a corridor for undocumented entry that is seen, both officially and popularly, through the lens of 'crime'.

The perception that Arizona is overrun by 'criminals' from south of the border, in turn, has reinforced the conviction that the federal government is weak. Civilian actors like the Minutemen of the mid-2000s, and the Soldiers and Engineers of later years, have taken it upon themselves to help 'restore' the government's capacity to legitimately use physical force to detect, detain, and deport those who do not belong. In other words, buoyed by the belief that the state is vulnerable and short-handed on the Arizona-Mexico border, these groups have engaged in popular sovereignty.

The Soldiers and Engineers had different assessments of how the state was weak and what role concerned citizens could play in helping fortify the state. The Soldiers believed that the Border Patrol suffered from a shortage of manpower and resources. For this reason, the Soldiers took it upon themselves to collaborate with the agency to protect a family operated ranch located near the border from undocumented crossers. They did so by cultivating the necessary skills to conduct reconnaissance patrols on the ranch. By contrast, the Engineers maintained that it

was not the agency's size, but rather the government's haphazard approach to surveillance that was the problem. Instead of collaborating with the Border Patrol, the Engineers scrutinized the agency's methods in order to develop an alternative system of surveillance. The civilian border group hoped to secure a contract with the Department of Homeland Security to restructure the agency, and with it the ways that the government walled out the Other. Despite their varying forms, the day-to-day activism of both groups was motivated by the conviction that state presence on the border was inadequate.

Methodology

Data collection

Ethnography is a particularly useful tool for understanding politics. By attending to how ordinary people make sense of and act on 'official rhetoric', we move away from 'stylized facts' or 'oversimplified descriptions' that may otherwise serve as the basis for theory-making (Auyero and Joseph, 2007: 5–6). In the current study, the characterization of nativist activism on the border as vigilantism obscures more than it reveals. It masks nativist activists' efforts to position themselves on the terrain of 'respectable' politics – whether it is as civilian champion of the Border Patrol or as a private 'border security' contractor. The term 'vigilantism' also hides the fairly widespread tolerance and even support that these border watch groups enjoy – among local conservative leaders, Department of Homeland security officials and agents, the media, technology companies, organizers of 'border security' expos, and others. Ethnography is particularly well-equipped to expose these misconceptions through careful study of nativist organizations and how they fit into the larger political terrain.

This study draws on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in central and southern Arizona between February 2011 and May 2012. Most of the data about the practices of two nativist organizations, the Soldiers and the Engineers, was collected over a seven-month period between April and October 2011. The data was primarily gathered through participant observation and informal interviews.

I gained entry to both groups by emailing the organizations. Ben, a leader from the Soldiers, invited me to attend a general monthly meeting and later to accompany him on patrols on the ranch. Through the initial meetings and the patrols, I was able to build rapport with some rank-and-file members, who then invited me on other patrols. Similarly, Phil, the founder of the Engineers, invited me to the ranch where the group operated. Over many visits to the ranch, I was able to meet all of the Engineers and observe them, both during a bottleneck period – when the group was waiting on a piece of software to be delivered – and afterwards, when the system had been completed and was ready for testing.

Observations were either written down in the moment or memorized to be transcribed later. I was able to jot down observations in a small notebook during the Soldiers' meetings and when I was observing the Engineers test a

piece of technology. During some sessions, such as on patrols with the Soldiers, I had to rely on memory. It would have been inappropriate to stop and take notes while on the move and in the midst of conversation with fellow patrol participants. When I could not take notes at first hand, I took audio notes on the drive home from the fieldsite and transcribed them later.

In addition, I also attended other events that afforded me opportunities to see group members interact with group outsiders. These events were open to the public and included several local Tea Party meetings and rallies, as well as forums and other gatherings organized by recognized conservative leaders. I also attended two prestigious national conferences about 'border security', at which the Engineers spoke and where they exhibited the surveillance technology they had developed.

To supplement this data, I conducted 10 formal interviews with individuals – six with Soldiers and four with Engineers. Albeit limited in number, the formal interviews were primarily aimed at gathering information about the groups' histories and learning about organizationally significant events that I could not directly observe. For instance, an interview with Phil, the founder of the Engineers, provided an overview of how the group had arrived at a current project. I also did content analyses of the extensive media generated by these border watch groups; this content came from electronic newsletters, websites, podcasts, short documentary films, and Youtube channels, as well as from news segments that featured the groups.

Cases

The Soldiers were the former local chapter of the Minuteman Civil Defense Corps (MCDC). They were founded in 2005 as a Minuteman chapter, but became a formal organization in their own right between late 2008 and early 2009, when MCDC disbanded.³ The Soldiers inherited much of their 'Standard Operating Procedures' from the MCDC, but the group's procedures changed in two significant ways. Compared to MCDC, the Soldiers considered their primary approach more 'proactive' because they actively sought to detect crossers; in contrast, several Soldiers characterized the original Minutemen's approach as 'lawn chair vigilantism'. In addition, the Soldiers were far better armed than their predecessors, with members sometimes opting to carry two assault rifles at a time on patrols. Indeed, at the first meeting of the Soldiers that I attended, I was asked whether I owned a gun and then urged to purchase one immediately.

The Engineers, by contrast, were not a civilian patrol group. Theirs was an organization concerned with studying existing border enforcement structures and sponsoring, researching, and developing technological alternatives. Phil, the founder of the Engineers, was heavily involved in the 1994 campaign to put Proposition 187 on the ballot in California. Disillusioned with the political atmosphere in California, he moved to Arizona in 2000, where he founded the Engineers. While the Soldiers and Engineers knew of each other and tried to collaborate, to my

knowledge, on at least one occasion, the organizations dismissed each other's methods as futile.

Both groups were predominantly composed of white men, whose ages varied between 50 and 80; most were nearing retirement or had recently retired. Interestingly, the leadership of the Soldiers did not fit this profile: the executive director, Sarah, was a white woman in her 50s, while Ben, another Soldier leader, was in his 40s. Unlike most of the members, both Sarah and Ben lacked military experience. The Soldiers had a core committed group of 20 members, with an additional 20 to 30 people who were affiliated but who only participated occasionally. Officially, the group had 150 vetted members, and the subscribers to its newsletter numbered nearly 500. The Engineers had a core group of six people, but had between 100 and 150 supporters nationally who visited the organization's websites, viewed its podcasts, and donated to keep the group afloat. Both groups' core members lived in the local areas where these organizations operated.

The Soldiers: Border patrol's civilian extension

The Soldiers believed that the state's presence in the borderland was, at best, precarious. The local Border Patrol station, according to the Soldiers, was not equipped with the manpower or the resources to effectively police the area; under these circumstances and despite the best intentions of the agents, the agency simply could not stem nor even deter the unauthorized flows of persons and goods in this particular locality. Thus, the Soldiers fashioned themselves into a civilian extension of the Border Patrol. In order to serve as 'extra eyes and ears' for the agency, the Soldiers engaged in three main activities. First, they acted as guardians of a family operated ranch that had become a thoroughfare for undocumented travelers. The Soldiers saw this locality as emblematic of how the state's inability to rein in migration was negatively impacting the entire nation. Second, as they protected the ranch, group members continually tried to work out how to be effective civilian border agents, both in appearance and in action. Third, the Soldiers created and maintained a system of documenting unauthorized crossers. Among other purposes, this documentation served as a concrete way to partner with the Border Patrol.

Protecting a locality

The Soldiers spent almost all of their time patrolling a 55,000-acre cattle ranch that sits on state and federal land approximately 30 miles north of the border. Laura and Jack, a married couple in their early 60s, owned the ranch and welcomed the Soldiers' presence. Laura likened the Soldiers' actions to the civilian defense her forbears provided during the Second World War:

In the Second World War, my aunt stood at night and watched the skies for planes, and she had this chart on her wall that identified all these different planes that could be

approaching, and Jack's mother, same thing [. . .] That was civil defense. [In addition], they had men, who had vision problems or flat feet or hearing problems and they worked here in the United States. At night, [these men] would patrol power plants and things that were vulnerable to enemy attack. And, that's what the Soldiers are.

For Laura, the Soldiers' practices were comforting and historically familiar. Just as her aunt and mother-in-law had scanned the skies at night, and others had volunteered to patrol power plants at home during wartime, the Soldiers, too, were helping the nation defend itself against its enemies.

In this case, of course, there was no war and there were no declared enemies. Since the late 1990s, however, it felt increasingly like 'war' for Laura and her family. The 'enemies' were furtive and ubiquitous: they crossed through the ranch land, day and night, cutting fences, damaging water pipes, scaring cattle, and leaving behind refuse. Each cut fence required costly mending and compelled time-consuming searches for the cattle that had wandered away in the meantime. Each severed water pipe required replacement, and led to many hours of manually hauling water to cattle. Over time, Laura grew to think about these occurrences as malicious acts of vandalism, rather than the desperate efforts of crossers trying to survive.

By the late 1990s, the ranch also began to feel physically unsafe. Laura forbade her teenage daughter from riding around the ranch land by herself. Several years later, husband and wife decided that the ranch house could never be left alone in case someone tried to break in. Holidays became complicated affairs: Jack and Laura went to a relative's home to celebrate Christmas Eve, while their son and daughter-in-law stayed at the ranch; then they switched on Christmas Day. In the late 2000s, it was unthinkable for Laura and Jack to let their grandchildren play outside without adult supervision. Thus, when the Soldiers volunteered to patrol their land, supplementing the Border Patrol – whose presence seemed very limited – Laura was overjoyed.

The Soldiers, in turn, made the ranch into the main setting for their operations: it represented a tangible way in which undocumented migration was affecting the US. On a number of occasions, I heard the Soldiers repeating the stories that Laura had told me, such as the time she and her husband had to borrow a water tanker from a neighbor when a water pipe was cut and the cattle's troughs had to be manually replenished with water. These tales of how the ranch had evolved over the years from a safe home for a hardworking American family to a place 'overrun with armed intruders' offered the Soldiers tangible evidence of how unauthorized flows were affecting the entire nation.

The ranch itself became a makeshift museum, a place where visitors could see and Soldiers could be reminded of the effects of unauthorized migration. After one patrol, a Soldier named Sam took me behind a shed and pointed to a cache of abandoned, rusting, and broken bicycles. Apparently, the bicycles had been gathered throughout the years from all over the ranch land; they had been piled together to show visitors how much unwanted traffic passed through there.

When I interviewed him later, Sam deeply commiserated with Jack and Laura. Although not a rancher himself, he lived on a property that intersected the route of undocumented crossers.

It's just not right, the lack of respect – being stolen from, hearing noises under my house, being woken up, somebody's trying to crawl under my house to sleep to stay warm [...] I couldn't even have chickens, they killed them all, for food. So that got me kind of riled and that's why I joined the Soldiers.

At least, he later explained, he was not trying to live off of his chickens; by contrast, Jack and Laura's livelihoods were being directly impacted by migration. For Sam, as for other soldiers, the 'trash' left behind by crossers on the ranch land, together with the ranchers' stories of hardship, provided concrete ways to conceptualize how unauthorized migration was impacting the US.

The Soldiers pegged the problem of insecurity to the barrenness, the lack of physical presence and protection, at the border. They believed that the border could easily be sealed, using a combination of strong fences and Border Patrol agents. As a result of the state's lack of presence, localities were left vulnerable. The group took it upon themselves to provide one locality – Jack and Laura's ranch – with a modicum of protection. The Soldiers hoped that by their presence they could help apprehend unauthorized crossers, redirect them elsewhere, or even deter them entirely.

Becoming a civilian soldier

The Soldiers tried to work out what it meant to be a serious civilian extension of the Border Patrol. They did so primarily by developing rules for how to look and act as a civilian force patrolling an area that they deemed to be unsafe.

From a distance, the Soldiers looked remarkably similar to Border Patrol agents. The Soldiers wore militaristic-style uniforms: many had long-sleeved shirts that were adorned with the group logo and 'Search and Rescue' patches. They wore combat boots and some also wore canvas snake-proof leggings. Despite the scorching hot weather, a Soldier told me that he always wore a pair of thick woolen socks that he had kept from his days in the Air Force; the socks helped protect his skin against small cactus thorns. They carried utility vests and backpacks filled with food, ammunition, and occasionally, first aid kits. The patrolling groups also carried radios and GPS devices, and one member always had a cell phone that could get reception in the desert. Participants strapped handguns to their belts and often carried assault rifles in the ready position. On one patrol, the 'mission commander', Russell, opted to bring along his assault rifle, but to leave behind his large water bottle. When I asked him about it, he replied sternly that we were more likely to die from enemy gunfire than from dehydration.

The Soldiers continuously worked out how to straddle the boundary between civilian and soldier by determining how to appropriately equip their bodies.

For example, one Vietnam veteran, Rudy, had acquired an expensive bulletproof vest which he used to wear underneath his uniform. He soon realized how much he suffered from carrying its immense weight over long periods of time. Other members – including Russell, who anticipated gun battles in the desert – discouraged him from wearing this heavy body armor, arguing that Border Patrol agents rarely wore vests because they interfered with quick movement. Rudy shed the vest. In a separate instance, at a monthly meeting, those present laughingly recalled a former member who used to wear a Kevlar helmet on patrols. While they agreed on the sensibility of bearing arms, wearing a combat ballistic helmet was considered ridiculous. Figuring out what members should wear and carry was not only an important process by which the group readied itself for the uncertainties of the border, but also a communal activity that allowed members to carve out their identities as civilian soldiers.

Besides dress and equipment, the Soldiers also sought to acquire a soldier's habitus. For example, patience and bodily discipline were characteristics held in high esteem. For instance, many Soldiers spoke with great respect about David, a retired Air Force mechanic in his late 60s. On his very first patrol, David fell on his back as he skidded on loose gravel while making his way down to the bottom of a dried out wash. While his hospitalization was short, he was bedridden for nearly a year. Once David was able to walk again and stand for longer stretches of time without experiencing pain, he returned and became an avid participant in Soldier patrols. Despite his frequent outings, as of my last conversation with him he had not yet encountered 'activity'. When I asked whether that was discouraging for him, he replied that he preferred *not* to encounter anyone, since that meant that the Soldiers' presence was successfully deterring illicit flows. For David, a good soldier-civilian remained committed and patient despite the obstacles that the patrols presented.

In addition to patience and discipline, careful observance was an admired trait; a diligent soldier-civilian was always mindful that clues were hidden everywhere. I experienced a number of episodes that illustrated this. The first time that I accompanied a Soldier patrol, we immediately came upon a large concentration of footprints in a wash. Although they might have belonged to migrants, there were surely many other feet that might have traversed that space, whether to hunt, to bird-watch, or, like the Soldiers, to track unauthorized crossers. Ben noted that though it was difficult to date the footprints, the moisture around some of them indicated that they were fresh. I silently doubted whether any of the Soldiers could even differentiate which footprints belonged to their team from the previous night, much less to hunters, to migrants, or to *coyotes* (professional human smugglers). As if sensing my doubts, Ben explained that the smaller footprints probably belonged to women and children, and that 'those over there', created by 'cheap plastic Wal-Mart shoes', belonged to migrants, while heavier footwear here probably belonged to the *coyotes*.

As we scrutinized the footprints, Sam, another younger member with no military experience, brought up a favorite conversation topic among the Soldiers – a unit of

Native American professional trackers that aided the Border Patrol on the nearby reservation. This group had been mentioned numerous times at meetings I attended. Sam recalled the story of a friend who had known such a tracker and been invited on a search and rescue patrol with him. On the basis of a single footprint, they had been able to locate and notify Border Patrol about a group of migrants. A helicopter had been dispatched, and when they saw it, the migrants had flattened themselves against the ground instead of scattering; this had led to their being promptly apprehended. For Sam, the moral of the story was that any footprint was an important sign stuffed with potential, as long as it was decoded properly. One simply needed the right training.

Documentation patrols

When the Soldiers solicited donations – at meetings, at their booths in public events, and online – it was often for the repair and replacement of their cameras. I quickly learned that the cameras occupied a central place in the group's practices and ultimately provided the Soldiers with a major component of their *raison d'être*. Once or twice a week, a team of Soldiers went on camera check patrols on the ranch. Well-armed and clad in heavy military gear, they navigated the rough desert terrain in order to locate the cameras that they had hidden in the earth's crevices. Once the cameras were found, the group replaced their batteries, downloaded the footage the machines had captured over the course of the week, and repositioned them to overlook a well-travelled migrant path. Through trial and error, the Soldiers developed methods to keep the cameras from being detected, yanked out, and broken – like using black tape to cover any lights the cameras emitted and chaining the machines to surrounding rocks. If a camera was no longer recording crossers, the Soldiers placed it somewhere else where they thought 'activity' might be more likely.

On one camera patrol in which I participated, we wandered aimlessly for what seemed like several hours searching for the cameras. The temperature range of the desert was unforgiving: we had started in the numbing cold of the pre-dawn hours but we were soon subjected to the blazing heat of midday. Though the previous week's camera handler had taken down the GPS coordinates, some of the cameras' locations had gotten lost in the shuffle. Russell, who was leading the patrol that day, patiently listened to the vague and static-ridden verbal directions that the previous camera handler provided over the phone. We eventually found one machine after circling the same patch of land for the third time. Another camera was located at the bottom of a steep wash. There was some discussion about whether it was safe for me to wait, alone and unarmed, at the top of the wash. I insisted that I would be fine in their absence. Despite my protestations, however, Russell had one of the men stay behind with me. The rest of the team awkwardly balanced their assault rifles and other heavy gear as they climbed down a slippery path, with only prickly *ocotillo* shoots and mesquite tree branches for support. When we were finally done for the day, Russell grinned with satisfaction.

He had completed the patrol successfully, in defiance of arduous conditions, relying almost solely on memory and observation.

Finding all six of the cameras in a 55,000-acre area turned out to be a time-consuming and fatiguing task. I assumed that this outing was unusual, given that we had little information to go on. But it soon became clear that my experience wandering around the desert with Russell was typical: the cameras' existence and locations were haphazardly recorded, if at all. In fact, Ben, the software developer who handled the cameras the most, was unsure whether the Soldiers had 'six or seven' machines.

The cameras served three main purposes. First, they presented occasions for honing one's habitus as a civilian soldier – an endeavor that, as the previous section illustrated, the Soldiers approached with great seriousness. The day that I joined them, Russell and his team had to orient themselves in a vast open space, with few artificial markers, in order to find the camera equivalents of six needles in a haystack. In addition, the day's obstacles required endurance, persistence, and strength. There was even an opportunity to demonstrate masculine protectiveness over me, the only woman in the group. Even if the lack of proper recordkeeping did occasionally result in a lost camera, from a positive standpoint, it justified frequent forays out into the ranch and occasions for soldiering.

Second, the cameras were also important for documenting and publicizing the Soldiers' understanding of the border. For the Soldiers, the raw footage of brown bodies, often carrying large box-like bundles on their backs – presumably marijuana – 30 miles north of the international boundary, constituted indisputable proof that the state was absent in this region.

These video clips were widely disseminated. The clips were uploaded onto the Soldiers' website and the group's Youtube channel, and were embedded into their electronic newsletter. The footage was often used for directly recruiting new members as well. For instance, at a Tea Party rally in 2011, the Soldiers decorated their booth with two large posters that featured printed stills from the group's footage. Ben told me that they took similar posters to gun shows, another place where they sought out prospective members. The footage was also circulated among politically sympathetic power holders and media outlets. As an example, when he was invited as a guest speaker to the Soldiers' monthly meeting, one Arizona state senator mentioned that he sometimes showed the group's footage to fellow politicians. In later months, the very same state senator starred in a short documentary about Arizona's 'open border', produced by a conservative talk show host and filmmaker; the documentary featured several clips that had been taken by the Soldiers' cameras. On two other occasions that I know of, such clips were also featured in segments about the border and immigration by mainstream news outlets.

In addition to providing opportunities for soldiering and helping publicize how 'out of control' the border had become, the cameras also served a third purpose. By documenting crossers, the Soldiers, much to their pride, were able to cultivate a working partnership with the Border Patrol. From what I gleaned, the Soldiers

encountered crossers very infrequently. Although my respondents were ready with stories of other members' encounters, no one I spoke with directly had come across a migrant during a patrol. Shapira (2013: 160) made the same observation among the Minutemen. Nonetheless, the Soldiers believed themselves to be of great service to the Border Patrol, thanks to their system of documentation. Every Monday, Ben gave a local Border Patrol contact any video recordings that the Soldiers' cameras had made of unauthorized crossers, as well as the time and location of the footage. Although he did not know for certain, Ben maintained that the agency benefited from this 'intel'. Like others in the group, he thought that by being an 'extra set of eyes and ears' for the Border Patrol, the Soldiers could help the agency deploy their resources more strategically.

The Soldiers morally distinguished themselves from other border watch groups by judging whether or not another civilian group had as 'good relations' with law enforcement as they believed they did. For instance, after we had completed a patrol, Michael, a middle-aged Soldier, told me that many border watch groups were indeed 'vigilantes' because they did not bother to cultivate working relationships with law enforcement and, often unwittingly, disrupted an agency's operations or 'did something stupid'. By contrast, the Soldiers collaborated with the Border Patrol, he proudly assured me. When I pushed him to explain further, Michael detailed the Soldiers' standard operating procedures: before a patrol, the group always informed the agency of their location; moreover, the Soldiers immediately notified the agency if they encountered any sign of 'suspicious' activity, and they gave the agency the weekly 'intel' that was collected on the cameras.

The importance of fostering positive relationships with the Border Patrol was broached again during a general monthly meeting. A Soldier explained that during a recent camera patrol he led, a Border Patrol agent had given him his business card and thanked him for the work the Soldiers were doing. Sarah, the group's executive director, chimed in that this was not unusual. When the Soldiers 'did gun shows', she explained, agents in civilian dress would often come by and express gratitude. Even if the extra help that the Soldiers provided was not something the agency could acknowledge publicly, individual agents often thanked the Soldiers privately, she continued. It was this sense of collaborating with, rather than disrupting or ignoring, law enforcement that Michael, Sarah, and other members believed distinguished the Soldiers from 'vigilante' groups.

This section has illustrated how a border watch group, the Soldiers, acted on its nativism by fashioning itself into the civilian counterpart of the Border Patrol. The Soldiers achieved this aim by patrolling a locality where the state appeared to be absent. The stories of the ranchers' daily struggles and the physical experience of patrolling their land became the prism through which the Soldiers viewed migration's impact on the nation. The Soldiers believed that the ranch had become unsafe because the local Border Patrol station simply lacked adequate resources to be a constant presence there. For this reason, the civilian group took it upon themselves to be the agency's 'extra eyes and ears'. The Soldiers let agents know of their whereabouts, called them if they encountered 'activity', and, most

importantly, shared any video footage of crossers that they acquired. On both 'Search and Rescue' and camera patrols, the Soldiers tried to figure out how to look, behave, and think like the civilian extension of law enforcement. The group drew great satisfaction in helping a shorthanded agency protect a piece of the nation that the state had apparently left open and unattended.

The Engineers: The state's border security consultants

The Engineers' nativist activism was also a state-building enterprise: they hoped to win a DHS contract to change the way the state conducted border surveillance. The group operated from a ranch on the border that functioned as a laboratory in which to develop and test border enforcement methods. From the ranch, the civilian organization scrutinized the Border Patrol's practices of detection and apprehension. Based on this close study, the Engineers drew on interdisciplinary knowledge, from engineering to seismology to computer programming, to develop technologies for alternative systems of border surveillance. To publicize their new system, the Engineers conducted live demonstrations for the media and local supporters, including immigration restrictionist politicians. The group joined the ranks of other 'white collar boundary builders' (Miller, 2014: 58) by attending and participating in conferences and exhibitions about 'border security'. As they did so, the Engineers began to think of themselves as 'border experts' who could advise the state on matters of border security.

The local as laboratory

For the Engineers, the local space from which they operated served as a laboratory, or a means, for figuring out how to gain 'control' over the border. On the ranch, the Engineers imagined, developed, and tested technologies of surveillance that were intended for regions far beyond the local. For this reason, too, the Engineers perceived the Border Patrol differently than the Soldiers did; rather than as a prospective partner, the Engineers saw the agency as an object of study and criticism.

Phil, the founding member of the Engineers, acquired the ranch in the early 2000s because it abutted the US-Mexico boundary, so it therefore seemed like the ideal place to 'study' the border. While one of the buildings served as his private residence, the rest of the ranch was converted into a test site. About 500 feet from the steel and rebar border fence, the Engineers had built a large workroom and stocked it with expensive surveillance instruments. An adjoining room was empty, save for several computers that monitored the ground sensors located throughout the ranch. Outside, an old bus had been moved to a clearing on one side of the ranch buildings so that it forked the possible paths of anyone walking away from Mexico; by manipulating movement, the Engineers had, for the purposes of a previous surveillance project, ensured that potential crossers would be within signal range. The thermal camera mounted on the roof of a building was also a

remnant of an earlier project. Operated remotely by an Engineer living in Texas, the camera had once produced footage that was broadcast over the internet in real time.

As part of their early efforts to figure out why the border was ‘out of control’, the Engineers put the Border Patrol’s practices under the microscope. The border watch group acquired a small airplane to conduct ‘aerial surveillance’ of agents in action. John, a young Engineer, explained the project enthusiastically:

We had a lot of fun! Because, what we were doing, we had scanners, and we would listen to the [Border Patrol’s] radio frequencies which were open at that time, they were broadcasting in the clear. We would launch the airplane, we had the scanner aboard, we’d listen to their traffic and say, ‘Ok, we’ve got a target.’ We knew where they were going, because of the landmarks they were using. So what we did was we would document how the Border Patrol worked. When they’d hit some action, we’d go over and we’d videotape it. We learned a lot that way.

The group combined the footage of Border Patrol that they captured from the airplane with what they heard on the agency’s unsecure radio frequencies in order to recreate how the agency detected ‘activity’, deployed its resources, and then went about apprehending migrants. By documenting and studying the agency’s actual methods and procedures, the Engineers concluded that law enforcement activities at the border were haphazard and insufficient.

The criticisms that the Engineers leveled against the Border Patrol were compiled into an hour-long video that drew on real ‘case studies’ to illustrate the ineffectiveness of the agency’s methods. In one such case study, a Border Patrol drone had detected a group of 30 crossers in the evening and a helicopter was dispatched. Although the crew on board had night vision goggles, the helicopter itself was not equipped with infrared cameras or a spotlight. The agents ended up flying to a location that was a quarter of a mile off in the wrong direction and, with limited night vision capability, they engaged in a futile and loud search for a period of time. After much radio transmission between the crew, the local Border Patrol station and a drone operator, the agents aboard the helicopter realized that they were searching in the wrong place and they rerouted. In the meantime, presumably, the crossers heard the helicopter’s noise and hid. While half of the original group of migrants was caught, the other half escaped. This ‘case study’ along with many others convinced the Engineers that the Border Patrol’s practices were ineffective.

The Engineers were aware that publicly criticizing the Border Patrol was a risky enterprise that could cost them support in politically conservative circles. While I was speaking with him, Phil received a phone call inviting him to present at a conference on national security that was going to be held in Phoenix the following month. Over the years, Phoenix had become the hub of such conferences in which representatives of law enforcement mingled with technology contractors and strategists (Miller, 2014). In this conference, the keynote speaker was going to be the producer of the National Geographic show, *Border Wars*.

Phil agreed to present. He was familiar with these kinds of conferences, having attended a similar 'border security' event in southern California a few weeks earlier. But when he got off the phone, Phil wondered whether the organizers would call him back to disinvite him once they researched his work further. After all, the conference was framed around *Border Wars*, a show that glorified the Department of Homeland Security, and particularly the Border Patrol. For Phil, the television show was nothing more than 'a puff piece': 'It's not analytical. It doesn't ask questions. It raises more questions, you know, than it answers. I happen to know a lot about the Border Patrol and how it works, and it's just dumb', he told me. Phil's invitation was not rescinded, however. The following month, he deliberately skipped the opening keynote address, which, as Phil suspected, did lionize the agency and earned the television producer a standing ovation from the dozens of uniformed DHS officials and agents who were in the audience. At the beginning of his own session later, Phil took pains to clarify that he was critical of the agency, not of individual agents. Then he discussed how the Engineers offered a more systematic approach to 'border control'.

In their daily activism, the Engineers used the local as a laboratory. The ranch was converted into a test site, while the local Border Patrol became an object of study. What made this endeavor an engaging one for the Engineers, however, was not simply identifying the problems and limitations in existing methods of border enforcement. The Engineers' activism was motivated by the prospect of developing an alternative, technologically savvy system of surveillance that they hoped would let them work as a private contractor for the DHS.

Engineering a new boundary

As they scrutinized the Border Patrol's methods, the Engineers concluded that the agency needed an entirely new approach to border enforcement based on systematic surveillance. As one Engineer put it, the question that drove the border watch group's activism was this: 'How do we know *everything* that's coming across the border?' To answer this question, the Engineers embarked on an iterative process of dismantling, reassembling, and testing technologies that they hoped would let them acquire comprehensive information about the border region.

In their very first project, they mounted a satellite internet video onto an all-terrain vehicle, hoping that it would enable 'mobile coverage' of a local piece of the border. They reasoned that even if the coverage were only of a small area, it could still have a significant impact when streamed in real-time over the internet. Multiple computer users – including those far from the US-Mexico border – could install a software program that the Engineers had developed. This program would run in the backgrounds of their computers, and if the mobile system 'detected' anything out of the ordinary, an alert would appear on the taskbar; it would be sufficient for just one user then to pick up the phone and contact immigration authorities in Arizona in order to initiate action. The system would not only allow concerned citizens to monitor the border from the comfort of their homes, wherever they

might be, but would address the problem of human error: even if one user missed the alert, another would see it.

The mobile system frequently broke down, however. The harsh weather conditions and rough terrain were formidable obstacles. But by 2003, the Engineers re-embarked on the quest for mobile surveillance: this time they acquired an unmanned aerial vehicle and mounted it with a system to send live video feed over cable networks. By the following year, they had made their drone night-vision capable as well. They gave up on the venture only when the Federal Aviation Administration forced them to ground their drone. Despite being forced to halt their project, they saw the experience as a success, and claimed that it was through their efforts that the DHS had finally been ‘shamed’ into using drones at the border.

The idea of broadcasting the border over the internet continued to fascinate them. In 2005, just as the Minutemen Project was being launched in Tombstone, Arizona, the Engineers set up thermal cameras near the border. Because all these cameras could be operated over the internet, they dubbed the volunteers who operated them the ‘millisecond men’ and named the whole project ‘operation virtual vigilance’. The labels they chose suggest how they cast their work as the technologically sophisticated foil to traditional forms of popular sovereignty among nativist groups on the border.

The technology approach always served as the backbone of the Engineers’ work, but the group was not content to use sophisticated devices simply to apprehend unauthorized crossers. They sought systematicity, which required the development of technologies that could be used to count, measure, and classify. As discussed earlier, the group had used a lightweight manned aircraft that had been fitted with a camera to record and study the Border Patrol’s practices. In 2009, the Engineers embarked on a grander effort to ‘document’ the border. This time, a crew flew over all nine of the Border Patrol Sectors that spanned the US-Mexico border. They noted where fences were located and what types they were. After assembling the information into maps, the group concluded that the DHS claimed that the border was much more fortified than it in fact was.

At the time of my fieldwork, the group was trying to work out other ways to measure and assess the government’s existing efforts at border enforcement. They launched another project in hopes of determining, for a given area of the border, how many people in total crossed on any given day. An infrared camera, fitted with a special lens, was fashioned into a detector. This camera had an adequate range of a few hundred feet; the Engineers envisioned such detectors eventually being installed along the entire length of the border. However, one serious drawback of the camera was that the slightest movement – human or nonhuman – would set it off. Phil recalled the group’s first decision to find an alternative:

We were sitting there a little frustrated. Connor [another Engineer] was saying, ‘That darned [infrared detector]. It’s the ground sensors that make more sense.’ So, I contacted a seismic exploration company in Texas. [Afterwards], we decided to install a

half-mile of seismic equipment on the ranch here. [...] We put these together with all our electronics, and it was picking people up regularly at 600 feet. And that's because we were taking 12 sensors and joining them all, adding their signals together [...] like an antenna. But you couldn't tell within 240 feet where they were crossing, but you knew they were coming this way. But we installed that, and began testing it.

The new sensor system's intent was to produce real-time, intelligible information about the borderlands. It consisted of ground sensors connected to solar-powered seismographs that digitized signals for computers; the computers, in turn, were supposed to help distinguish between 'threatening' and 'nonthreatening' movement. Then, depending on what had triggered the signal, mini-drones stationed nearby would be dispatched to film the area in question. What proved to be a bottleneck was developing the software to analyze the signals in real time.

At 600 feet, it takes over two minutes to walk up to the line [boundary]; so we can grab data 30 seconds at a time, which gives us the time to analyze it and see [whether] this is a person [or a] horse, or whatever. One of the problems with the little sensor at 30 feet is that you don't have very much time to analyze the signal. [What is giving off the signal] is here and then it's gone.

The group contacted a firm that had created software which enabled live access to data collected from sensors. The Engineers also began developing additional software that could recognize what was being detected. They created an algorithm based on the contrast between how people and animals walked: while animals placed their feet down, humans dropped their weight onto their feet. While a group of humans walking together would multiply the frequency of the signal and therefore muddy it, the data produced would nonetheless create a unique signature and raise red flags.

After installing the new sensor system on the ranch, the Engineers conducted 'live demonstrations'. In one such demonstration, the attendees included an immigration restrictionist state senator, two prominent ranchers who often appeared in the news, other local supporters of the Engineers, and a few members of the media. In addition to the Engineer Connor, the main hosts of the event included experts in seismic data and digital signal processing. An Engineer flew an ultralight aircraft over the border, triggering the sensors and sounding a loud alarm. Later, a group of volunteers, as mock 'illegal aliens', walked northward on the ranch. When the sensors detected the group's footsteps, an alarm again sounded and the Engineers' drone prototype automatically flew over to the area where the mock crossers were, feeding live footage back to a computer. The 'live demonstration' was considered a success.

The Engineers envisioned an alternative system of surveillance and developing this alternative system became the focus of their daily work. Since the early 2000s, the group's activism evolved from the initial close study of enforcement methods, followed by tinkering with various technologies, then partnering with experts from

other fields, to assembling a new system, conducting field tests, and assessing the results. Eventually, the group began to see themselves as ‘border experts’ and ‘techies’ rather than ‘activists.’

Techies on the border

The Engineers believed that they provided a viable, cost-effective ‘solution to the border problem’. The terminology is suggestive of the Engineers’ self-presentation: the group often thought of itself as providing a niche service in the arena of border security rather than an immigration restrictionist organization engaged in activism. This self-presentation was made apparent in two interrelated ways: in the Engineers’ narratives about their own involvement and in the group’s boundary-making practices.

Members thought of themselves as techies. For instance, although Connor joined the National Guard as soon as he finished high school, he believed that growing up with a rocket scientist as a father had poised him for a career in engineering. While in the National Guard, Connor also worked as a manager for an information technology company. The company tanked when the dot-com bubble burst in the early 2000s. He decided to join the Engineers when he saw Phil on the news discussing the need to technologically improve border security. When I asked him what he liked the most about the Engineers, Connor compared working with the group to working for Lockheed Martin, a defense company:

It was the freedom and possibility of developing something really, really cool, like we have now. And working on really neat technology and then being in charge of it. I mean you go work for Lockheed – it’s going to be 20 years before you’re in charge of anything, and pretty much you’re going to be bowing down to everybody else’s wishes.

According to Connor, the Engineers’ activism was analogous to the kind of work that was done in security and technology companies, minus the hierarchical organization.

Despite having no background in engineering, another young member, Dale, grew to see himself as a techie as well. Because of an accident that left him deaf in one ear, he could not join law enforcement as he had hoped and became, instead, a ‘jack of all trades’. He began to get involved with the Engineers by doing odd jobs around the ranch. Before long, Dale was also actively involved in the operation and testing of technologies – whether it was manning infrared cameras, participating in ‘aerial surveillance’ of the Border Patrol, or figuring out how to best test the new sensors. He was particularly excited by the ‘cool’ sensors the group had developed.

The Engineers’ self-presentation as techies dovetailed with the manner in which the group distinguished itself from other border watch organizations. When I happened to mention the Soldiers, for instance, Dale shook his head. The Soldiers, he told me, were not to be taken seriously. How could a bunch of guys ‘playing dress-up on the border’ be fighting unauthorized immigration? By contrast, the Engineers

positioned themselves in the more 'serious' border security industry; likewise, both the group's partners and their competitors were other security and defense contractors. This became particularly evident when I was chatting with Dale and Connor in front of the workroom one day. Phil drove up and, by way of greeting, joked that Dale and Connor should be careful not to divulge too much information about what the group was working on because I might be a spy for General Dynamics, an aerospace and defense company.

Conferences where 'white collar boundary builders' (Miller, 2014: 58) assembled to peddle their wares and discuss matters of 'border security' were among the Engineers' favorite events to attend. At these settings, rubbing shoulders with defense contractors, law enforcement agencies, and other stakeholders, the Engineers began marketing their product. At one conference session, Phil, presenting himself as a 'border expert', explained the problem with border enforcement in the following way: Currently, the Department of Homeland Security assesses how secure the border is on the basis of one set of numbers – apprehensions at a given time. Phil argued that that number should constitute only the numerator of the correct measure of apprehension; what DHS also needed, he argued, was the 'denominator', or the actual number of people making unauthorized entry. Without this crucial number, he insisted that it was impossible for the federal government to make any accurate claims about 'operational control'. In addition to making the border apprehension rate more calculable, he argued that the Engineers' sensor-based system could provide real-time information about where unauthorized entries took place, so that enforcement resources could be mobilized in more targeted ways. At another conference several months later, the Engineers exhibited their system and claimed that it provided the only way to have 'seamless coverage of the entire border'.

While they engaged in nativist activism differently than that of the Soldiers, the Engineers were nonetheless also involved in a state-building endeavor. Rather than partnering with the Border Patrol in order to defend a local site, the Engineers wanted to revamp the agency's enforcement methods along the entire border. To work out a better 'solution' to the 'border problem', the Engineers studied the agency, devised new systems of surveillance by drawing on interdisciplinary fields of knowledge, and tested out the new technologies that they developed on the ranch. The group's point of entry to the state was through the growing 'border security industrial complex' (Miller, 2014: 27): the Engineers exhibited their work at border security conferences, reinforcing their belief that members were 'techies' and 'border experts'. The Engineers hoped that, by bringing public attention to the absence of systematic border surveillance, they could eventually convince the state to use the systems they had developed.

Nativism, popular sovereignty and the state

Previous research has not attended to the varying ways that nativist groups relate to the state and enact popular sovereignty, or to the sets of specific practices aimed at complementing and correcting the state in hopes of restoring its capacity to

legitimately use physical force. The foregoing ethnographic comparison has demonstrated that both the nativist groups involved acted on the conviction that the state is weak at its extremity (in this case, the nation's southern border). Each organization then worked on constructing a relationship with the state. While the Soldiers tried to complement the Border Patrol by becoming its civilian extension, the Engineers hoped to restructure the agency by becoming a contractor for the DHS. That the two groups enjoyed tolerance and even support from several state actors suggests that 'popular sovereignty', rather than 'vigilantism', more accurately characterized their activism. The research suggests several areas of further research.

First, scholars should empirically examine how nativist sentiment is translated into activism in other contexts. The current study suggests that there is a relationship between nativist grassroots activism and the state but that the nature of this relationship can vary even across two contemporaneous and geographically proximate groups. Nativist activism in the nation's interior where other parts of the state, such as police and sheriffs' departments (Armenta, 2012), are the primary agents of immigration enforcement may be a particularly fruitful area of inquiry.

Second, comparative ethnographic study of nativist organizations in different settings can also provide us with a better understanding of how practices of immigration enforcement shape perceptions about the state's strength. The tremendous buildup on the US-Mexico border since the early 1990s (Nevins, 2002; Dunn, 2009) has, paradoxically, been accompanied by a keen sense that the state is absent and weak in the region. Similarly, how nativist groups have understood the devolution of immigration enforcement to the local level (Coleman, 2012) merits further study. To the extent that the localization of immigration control has fueled perceptions of state weakness, we might expect the mobilization of grassroots nativist groups.

Third, this study's findings suggest that the privatization of immigration control, and the niches it creates for nativist organizations, also warrant scholarly attention. The border spectacle has created myriad opportunities for profit. In expos and university tech parks where 'white collar border builders' convene, the 'lines between academics, private industry, and border enforcement' – and, one might also add, certain types of nativist organizations like the Engineers – 'are becoming increasingly blurred' (Miller, 2014: 58).

Finally, the concept of popular sovereignty should not only be consigned to discussions of nativist mobilization on the US-Mexico border. Rather, we can expect popular sovereignty in other contexts where the state is perceived to be weak or absent. The notion of popular sovereignty can tether ethnographic study of a group's micro-practices to the larger political context in which they operate by inviting analysis of the relationship between state and non-state actors, as well as the sociological factors that nurture appraisals of state weakness.

Acknowledgements

The author wishes to thank Abigail Andrews, Laleh Behbehanian, Ryan Calder, Siri Colom, Gabriel Hetland, Lina Hu, Michael Levien, Christine Trost and Michael Burawoy for their helpful feedback and advice. She is also particularly grateful to Lindsey Gaydos for

meticulously transcribing interviews and Benjamin McCord and Marni Elci for their help with proofreading the article.

Notes

1. In addition to the names of these two groups, the names of individuals are also pseudonyms.
2. Most members of the loosely knit Sovereign Citizen Movement believe that the US government is illegitimate and that the existing system of laws and taxes are intended to enslave people. The anti-government movement made news in April 2014 when Clive Bundy, a Nevada cattle rancher and a self-described sovereign, got into an armed stand-off with law enforcement; the standoff was the culmination of a long legal dispute with the United States Bureau of Land Management about the payment of grazing fees. The following month, Jerad and Amanda Miller, two sovereigns who had supported Bundy, killed Las Vegas police officers; during the Bundy protest, Jerad Miller was quoted as saying 'I really don't want violence toward [federal agents] but if they're gonna come and bring violence to us, well, if that's the language they want to speak, we'll learn it.' See Johnston (2014) and Inside Story Team (2014).
3. There are several reasons for the movement's fragmentation. First, there were highly publicized disagreements within the Minutemen's leadership, which emerged as early as 2005. Second, the Minutemen rank and file grew disillusioned with its leadership; for a thoughtful discussion of why this happened, see Shapira (2013). Finally, the murders of Raul Flores, and his nine-year-old daughter, Brisenia Flores, in Arivaca, Arizona, during a robbery organized by Shawna Forde, a leader of a splinter Minutemen group, did irrevocable damage to the group's public image. As a result, the movement fragmented and groups emerged under new names and, in some cases, with new organizational goals and methods.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: The research for this article was made possible with the support of the Center for Race and Gender, the Center for Latino Policy Research and the Department of Sociology at UC Berkeley.

References

- Andreas P (2001) *Border Games: Policing the US-Mexico Divide*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Armenta A (2012) From sheriff's deputies to immigration officers: Screening immigrant status in a Tennessee jail. *Law & Policy* 34(2): 191–210.
- Auyero J and Joseph L (2007) Introduction: Politics under the ethnographic microscope. In: Auyero J and Joseph L (eds) *New Perspectives in Political Ethnography*. New York: Springer, pp. 1–13.
- Bosniak L (2008) *The Citizen and the Alien: Dilemmas of Contemporary Membership*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

- Calavita K (1996) The new politics of immigration: Balanced-budget conservatism and the symbolism of Proposition 187. *Social Problems* 43(3): 284–305.
- Chavez L (2013) Spectacle in the desert: The Minuteman Project on the US-Mexico border. In: Dowling J and Inda JX (eds) *Governing Immigration through Crime: A Reader*. Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, pp. 115–127.
- Coleman M (2012) The ‘local’ migration state: The site-specific devolution of immigration enforcement in the US south. *Law & Policy* 34(2): 159–190.
- Cornelius W (2005) Controlling ‘unwanted’ immigration: Lessons from the United States, 1993–2004. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 31(4): 775–794.
- Coutin S (2000) *Legalizing Moves: Salvadoran Immigrants’ Struggle for US Residency*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.
- De Genova N (2005) *Working the Boundaries: Race, Space, and ‘Illegality’ in Mexican Chicago*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Doty RL (2009) *The Law into Their Own Hands: Immigration and the Politics of Exceptionalism*. Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press.
- Dowling J and Inda JX (2013) *Governing Immigration through Crime: A Reader*. Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Dunn T (1997) *The Militarization of the US-Mexico Border, 1978–1992: Low-Intensity Conflict Doctrine Comes Home*. Austin, TX: CMAS Books, University of Texas Press.
- Dunn T (2009) *Blockading the Border and Human Rights: The El Paso Operation that Remade Immigration Enforcement*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.
- Eastman CLS (2012) *Shaping the Immigration Debate: Contending Civil Societies on the US-Mexico Border*. Boulder, CO: First Forum Press.
- Fleishman D (2004) Paper terrorism: The impact of the ‘sovereign citizen’ on local government. *The Public Law Journal* 7–10.
- Golash-Boza T (2012) *Due Process Denied: Detentions and Deportations in the United States*. New York: Taylor and Francis.
- Inda J (2006) *Targeting Immigrants: Government, Technology, and Ethnics*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.
- Inside Story Team (2014) Nevada rancher versus the federal government: Who’s in the right? *Al-Jazeera America*, 22 April. Available at: <http://america.aljazeera.com/watch/shows/inside-story/articles/2014/4/22/nevada-rancher-vthefederalgovernmentwhosintheright.html> (accessed 21 June 2014).
- Johnson JL (2011) Mobilizing Minutewomen: Gender, cyberpower, and the new nativist movement. *Research In Social Movements, Conflicts and Change* (32): 137–161.
- Johnston C (2014) Killers of Las Vegas cops harbored anti-government ideology. *Reuters*, 9 June. Available at: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/06/09/us-usa-nevada-shooting-idUSKBN0EK1U320140609> (accessed 21 June 2014).
- Kil S, Menjivar C and Doty RL (2009) Securing borders: Patriotism, vigilantism and the brutalization of the US American public. *Sociology of Crime, Law and Deviance* 13: 297–312.
- Massey D and Sanchez RM (2010) *Brokered Boundaries: Creating Immigrant Identity in Anti-Immigrant Times*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Massey D, Durand J and Malone N (2002) *Beyond Smoke and Mirrors: Mexican Immigration in an Era of Economic Integration*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Miller T (2014) *Border Patrol Nation: Dispatches from the Front Lines of Homeland Security*. San Francisco, CA: City Light Open Media.

- Navarro A (2008) *The Immigration Crisis: Nativism, Armed Vigilantism, and the Rise of a Countervailing Movement*. Lanham, MD: Altamira Press.
- Neiwert D (2013) *And Hell Followed With Her: Crossing the Dark Side of the American Border*. New York: Nation Books.
- Nevins J (2002) *Operation Gatekeeper and Beyond*. New York: Routledge.
- Nevins J (2008) *Dying to Live: A Story of US Immigration in an Age of Global Apartheid*. San Francisco, CA: City Lights Publishers.
- Newton L (2008) *Illegal, Alien, or Immigrant: The Politics of Immigration Reform*. New York: New York University Press.
- Ngai M (2003) The strange career of the illegal alien: Immigration restriction and deportation policy in the United States, 1921–1965. *Law and History Review* 21(1): 69–108.
- Oliviero KE (2011) Sensational nation and the Minutemen: Gendered citizenship and moral vulnerabilities. *Signs* 36(3): 679–706.
- Shapira H (2013) *Waiting for José: The Minutemen's Pursuit of America*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Author Biography

Emine F. Elcioglu is a PhD candidate in Sociology at the University of California, Berkeley. Her current research explores the politics of immigration in the US, with a strong focus on the relationship between social movements, state practices, and global processes.