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"WELCOME TO THE BORDER": NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC'S *BORDER WARS* AND THE NATURALIZATION OF BORDER MILITARIZATION

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This article argues that National Geographic's highly rated television series Border Wars *(BW) bestows border enforcement with a "natural" quality and precludes any discussion of alternatives to border buildup. It does this in three main ways. First, even though there is no actual war, the show frames federal agents as soldiers and their enforcement practices as soldiering. As such, escalation of border enforcement is portrayed as a fatalistic necessity in confronting a guerrilla-like enemy. Second, to the extent that the show depicts actual encounters with crossers, it goes to great lengths to simplify the context and moral implications of crossers' stories. Third,* BW *fixes the viewer's gaze on objects—particularly illicit ones—and evades a discussion of the social processes hidden behind them. In these ways,* BW *essentializes cross-border flows and justifies border enforcement.*

Introduction

When *Border Wars* (*BW*) aired in January 2010, it became the National Geographic Channel's highest-rated television series premiere (Gorman 2010). Since then, *BW* has aired five seasons for a total of 56 episodes. By capitalizing on its association with the educational ambitions of National Geographic, the show purports to realistically portray how law enforcement "fight[s] terrorism and intercept[s] illegal entrants from the air, on the ground and at the port of entry" (National Geographic Channel 2013).

Its claim to provide an undistorted insight into the social reality of the border is misleading, however. Instead, *BW* naturalizes border enforcement and closes off any exploration of alternative approaches to cross-border movement. It accomplishes this in three ways. First, as its name suggests, the show frames encounters between federal agents and unauthorized crossers as an endless war. Because the enemy is characterized as ruthless, persistent, and guerrilla-like, border militarization is depicted as both inevitable and necessary. Second, the show goes to great lengths to depict border crossers—the enemy—simplistically: namely by dehumanizing them, by casting them either as dangerous or objects

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of pity, and by giving short-shrift to their stories. Finally, *BW* frames agents' seizures of illicit objects as the satisfying resolution of enforcement. By fixing the viewer's gaze on these objects, the show evades a discussion of the social processes hidden behind them, including how they were rendered illicit in the first place. In these ways, *BW* essentializes cross-border flows and celebrates border enforcement.

Methodology

We draw on close content analysis of the fourth season of *BW*. To date, there are a total of five seasons. There were two reasons we selected season 4. First, we preferred a more recent season to an older one, as it has developed an established worldview and repertoire of tropes and techniques that it deploys. Second, the total number of episodes in season 4 is closest to the average number of episodes across all seasons.

In each episode, we considered how the show depicted the two sides of the "border wars": agents and crossers. We identified the most frequent tropes and themes that *BW* used to frame the social reality captured on camera. We also noted whether and how the show contextualized the content. Then, we observed each episode to see how it created and resolved dramatic tensions.

In the first empirical section of this article, we explore how the U.S.–Mexico border is depicted as a frontline of war. Agents are likened to soldiers who courageously battle against an elusive, relentless, and dangerous enemy. Consequently, border buildup is framed as both desirable and unavoidable. In the second and third empirical sections, we show how *BW* must work hard to maintain the black-and-white framework of "war." By virtue of the complex social realities the show captures, there are many potential opportunities to challenge border enforcement. Yet the show manages to intentionally restore the paradigms of war. In the second section, we consider how *BW* manages the nuanced interiority of the "enemy" and the morally ambiguous moments created when crossers are "caught" on camera. In the third section, we shift our focus from the agents' encounters with people to their encounters with objects, and we discuss the ways in which the show collapses and erases the complex social realities contained behind the objects agents come to seize and destroy.

The next section begins with a brief history of border enforcement. We trace how Border Patrol moved from the margins to the center of public concern over the twentieth century. This history, however, has been downplayed in current public discourse about immigration; today, enforcement has become a spectacle, which *BW* helps perpetuate.

The Spectacle of Border Enforcement

For nearly half a century after its inception in 1924, the Border Patrol (hereafter, BP) existed at the margins of the criminal justice system. During this era, the agency charged with border enforcement ran on a vaguely defined

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mission, a paltry budget, and limited manpower (Andreas 2001; Hernández 2010). However, this began to change in the late 1970s. Public anxiety about immigration from the Global South increased while Immigration and Naturalization Services (INS) officials hoping to secure more congressional funds initiated a publicity campaign about the growth of unauthorized migration to the U.S. (Ackerman 2014, 11–3; Tichenor 2002, 229). In 1986, the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) was signed into law. Although IRCA regularized the status of more than three million immigrants, it did not create a structure to handle future generations of undocumented residents. Arguably, IRCA's most enduring feature was its expansion of border enforcement to unprecedented levels (Hernández 2010; Tichenor 2002).

The differences in the size and scope of BP before and after IRCA are considerable. Between 1980 and 1989, congressional appropriations for BP funding increased by nearly 200 percent from $82.6 million to $246.4 million, while staff positions for the agency grew by 88 percent from 2,915 to 5,485 (Dunn 1996, 180–1). In addition to the agency's unprecedented growth, the year 1986 marked the expansion of BP's focus to drug enforcement. Within 2 years, half of all BP agents were deputized to carry out antidrug smuggling operations. The agency's expanded jurisdiction into drug enforcement justified the unit's access to high-power rifles and other military-issue equipment. Additionally, drug enforcement became the basis for closer cooperation between the INS and the military (Dunn 1996, 52–3). Thus, under the Reagan Administration, the BP became a federal agency with tremendous political significance, and border enforcement took on an expanded and militarized role.

In the following decade, the BP shifted its enforcement paradigm from apprehension to prevention of entry. In 1993, BP's sector chief, Silvestre Reyes, began Operation Hold-the-Line at the El Paso/Ciudad Juárez border. Instead of apprehending unauthorized migrants after entry, agents were deployed for around-the-clock surveillance at the U.S.–Mexico boundary (Dunn 2009). The "prevention through deterrence" strategy, as it came to be known, was formally adopted by the INS for the four busiest points of entry throughout the U.S.–Mexico border. The intent was that once these urban areas were "secured," the surrounding rough rural terrain would serve as a natural deterrent for crossers (Cornelius 2001).

This prevention-focused strategy, however, has not deterred entry (Cornelius 2001). The population of undocumented residents living in the U.S. has mushroomed from 5.7 million in 1995 to 11.7 million in 2012 (Pew Research 2013a). Moreover, the majority have children and spouses in the U.S. (Pew Research 2013b). Instead of deterring crossers, the militarized enforcement at urban ports of entry has pushed crossers—such as recent deportees who wish to reunite with their families—to risk passage through remote, dangerous areas. Prospective crossers have thus sought out the expensive services of professional smugglers whose fees have steadily increased. The fee to smuggle an individual from Northern Mexico into the U.S. has risen from around $750 in 1992 to upwards of $2,800 a decade later (Mexican Migration Project 2013). The

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staggering profits generated by human smuggling, in turn, has attracted the involvement of drug cartels. Increasingly, crossers must transport drugs as part of the price of passage (Francis 2008; O'Connor 2011). In addition, border buildup has led migrants to attempt crossing through ports of entry with fraudulent documents (Andreas 2001, 95). In other words, rather than deterring entry, the escalation in border enforcement has increased the stakes of cross-border movement and spawned an intricate system of illegal practices.

Instead of recognizing the symbiotic relationship between escalation and clandestine flows, however, political officials have resorted to more buildup as the only viable policy option. Between 1993 and 2012, the number of BP agents increased by over 400 percent, totaling 21,165 (U.S. Border Patrol 2012). It has not stopped there: in the summer of 2013, the Senate passed a measure that would double the agency's size. To explain the desire for escalation, Peter Andreas (2001) has suggested the importance of border enforcement's expressive function. The border has become the terrain on which politicians can demonstrate their "commitment to territorial integrity" (ibid., 140). In other words, border enforcement is a "ritualistic performance" intended to project the "state's moral resolve" (ibid., 11). Border escalation, therefore, has become an end in itself.

As we show in this article, the television series *BW* both draws on and reinforces this spectacle. By framing the border region as a place of "wars," the show exploits the drama of the "frontlines" and popularizes the desire for border buildup. The show's crew embeds itself with law enforcement agents under the purview of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS)—Border Patrol, Customs and Border Protection (CBP), and Immigration and Customs Enforcement—filming their encounters with licit and illicit flows of bodies and goods, usually across the U.S.–Mexico border.

The show's association with the National Geographic Society (NGS) is crucial in infusing the show with an aura of political neutrality and even scientific authority. Since its founding in the late nineteenth century, NGS's mission has been to sponsor scientific expeditions on the one hand, while popularizing scientific inquiry through education on the other. Today, National Geographic's trademarked yellow border has a ubiquitous presence. NGS's main award-winning journal has a readership of 60 million while its cable channel has a global viewership of 70 million (Hoovers 2013; NGS 2012). When Nicholas Stein, the show's producer, frames *BW* as the "yellow border meet[ing] the real border" (Cavanaugh and Heilbrunn 2010), the show capitalizes on its association with a brand with educational ambitions and institutional prestige. As Stein puts it, *BW* purports to provide viewers with "a real sense of what's going on down there" (ibid.).

Critical scholarship has shown, however, that the combination of documentaries with television programming creates distorted versions of social reality (Cavender 2004; Cecil and Leitner 2009). The merging of information programming with entertainment television over the past few decades has produced a new genre known as infotainment. Constrained by the requirement for "entertainment value," this genre freely blends fact and fiction.

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Similarly, we argue that *BW* exhibits many of the distortive features of infotainment. *BW* exclusively delivers the perspective of law enforcement—even when migrants are given the space to tell their stories. Moreover, it provides neither sociological nor historical contextualization of what is being depicted, bestowing clandestine cross-border flows with an ahistorical, essentialist character. Although the show often notes that smugglers creatively respond to improvements in enforcement techniques, there is no critical analysis of this symbiotic relationship. Nor is there any exploration of alternatives to escalating border buildup. *BW*, it seems, can only beget more border wars. By naturalizing the U.S.–Mexico border, the show reinforces the ritualistic and performative character of border enforcement. It also draws on this spectacle as a source of viewer pleasure.

Inventing a War

As its name suggests, *BW* positions itself as a show documenting war on the border. Watching the show, it is easy to forget that there is *no* war taking place along the U.S.–Mexico border. The choice to use "war" or "wars" is an intentional one that establishes the daily work of agents as an endless militarized struggle between a military organization (CBP) and a cunning guerilla organization (smugglers). The terrain fought over is the symbolic space of the border—an area that is geographically defined and abstractly representative of the nation's integrity. *BW* establishes a circular and reciprocal relationship of danger and enforcement. The show casts the border as a dangerous militarized space, thus validating the ongoing militarization of border enforcement. Similarly, the increased militarization validates the drama and pleasure viewers derive from spectacles of danger and violence.

The protagonists on the show are DHS personnel. This is made clear from the opening sequence when the narrator explains that "everyday, agents and officers of the DHS guard the frontlines, as illegal immigrants and drug traffickers search for new ways to penetrate 24/7." The positioning of agents as protagonists is not surprising given that National Geographic's film crew is strictly embedded with the agents. This relative position would preclude the show from presenting footage depicting agents from a different perspective such as a non-governmental organization independently documenting BP human rights violations. In addition, the show obviously cannot present how agents behave off-camera and thus naturalizes the agents' supervised, on-camera behavior as their everyday behavior. Whenever the show does use footage not captured by the *BW* crew, it is always obtained from the agents' own equipment, further cementing the agents' gaze as the show's only point of view. The audience sees the world through the literal crosshairs of the agents' night-vision scopes (Figure 1).

BW transforms the agents into soldiers by using visual cues to signal their military status. For instance, when agents are shown using assault rifles and vests, they come to resemble soldiers more than a domestic enforcement agency.

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Figure 1. In Two Separate Instances in Episode 3, Migrants Are Shown through the Crosshairs of Agents' Night-Vision Scopes.

Figure 2. Both Scenes Are from Episode 3. On the Left, an Agent Scours the Landscape below for Unauthorized Crossers. On the Right, the Agent Points to the Location of a Crosser.

Helicopters, a powerful symbol of military power since the Vietnam War, make frequent appearances as well. In a particularly memorable scene in episode 3, agents are transported via helicopter to intercept crossers in the wilderness outside McAllen, TX. The image of agents/soldiers leaning with their assault rifles out of a helicopter's open bay, surveying the wild terrain below, echoes iconic scenes from many Vietnam War movies. This scene frames how the audience views the agents—as soldiers on a mission. It also frames how the agents view the world around them—from the vantage point of the helicopter as the setting of a war. In order to establish the borderland as a battlefield, the narrator frequently reminds the viewers that agents are on "the frontlines," and there are numerous references to the borderlands as inhospitable, dangerous terrain (Figure 2).

It is the show's ability to tap into the myth of the soldier that most powerfully transforms the agents into military men and women. The protagonists, as well as the narrator, frequently equate their successes or failures as tantamount to maintaining the nation's integrity. In episode 2, for example, a CBP canine trainer remarks: "The smuggler has all the time in the world. He has days, weeks, months, to plan his entry. The time is against us. That officer has to be 100% right all the time, you know, any mistake on his part could lead to some serious consequences to our nation."

This statement positions the agent as a soldier whose everyday actions determine the well-being of the country as a whole. In episode 2, for example, a

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BP officer arriving at his office early in the morning discusses how his family "understands" when he receives border enforcement-related calls in the middle of the night. This last trope cements the role of agents as soldiers and the border as a battlefield by positioning agents on the "front" as opposed to the nation and family the agent is protecting in the "rear."

Every war must have an enemy, and *BW* is no exception. As the show's opening sequence indicates, the show casts "illegal immigrants and drug traffickers" as the agents' antagonists. This cunning enemy, similar to those of the Vietnam War and the War on Terror, uses guerilla tactics and makes it difficult for agents to tell friend from foe. Numerous scenes position the agents' main conflict as unmasking the enemy's deception: discovering "bunkers" full of drugs in "stash houses," revealing secret compartments in "tampered" cars, and capturing border crossers "before they blend in with the community." These guerilla tactics force the agents' to continually upgrade their own tactics and introduce new and advanced military technology, such as low lights scopes and "density busters" (used in uncovering secret compartments). In a never-ending cycle, the enemy must also upgrade its own tactics. Border enforcement is then positioned as an ever-escalating military conflict where agents are justified in using any means necessary in order to protect the nation.

However, if border enforcement is a war, what kind of war is it? According to *BW*, the conflict is an endless struggle with undefined goals against an intangible enemy. Agents themselves present a fatalistic attitude toward their work; they often conclude a tense scene with the statement "Welcome to Rio Grande," or "Welcome to El Paso," a sardonic expression defining the conflict as simply the status quo. No matter how many crossers are caught or drugs are seized; the enemy can never be fully vanquished for it is both intangible and omnipresent. Rather than undercutting the logic for the war (why wage a war that cannot be won?), the show reinforces the need for further militarization by continually referring to ever-growing danger without deeply examining the actual sources of the danger. *BW* instead chooses to provide viewers pleasure by repeatedly enacting scenes of danger and violence. There is no end in sight, as at the conclusion of each episode the narrator states "The agent faces another day."

Ambivalent Success: The Capture of Human Bodies

BW dedicates a considerable amount of time to depicting encounters between BP agents and migrants. It does so by utilizing the show's main premise of the border-as-war-zone to interpret these events. In order to create the aura of danger, the show initially presents migrants—or "bodies" as agents call them—as threatening objects that must be revealed and contained. The capture and exposure of these bodies, however, leads to an ambivalent moment for the show. The once-nebulous threat is now personified by the presence of a human being. This moment exposes viewers to the other side of the "border war" and could lead to the collapse of the show's fatalist approach to the border as a war

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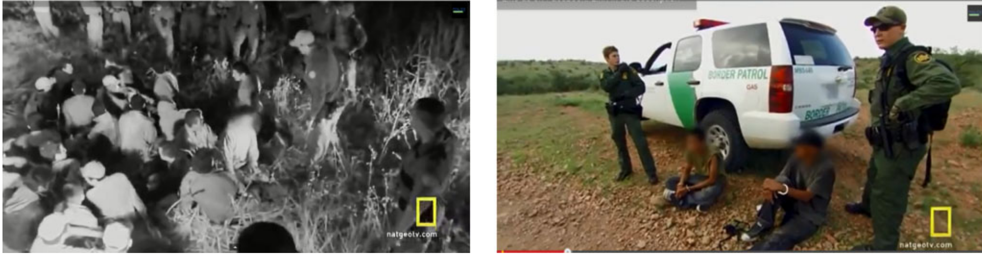

Figure 3. The Scene on the Left is from Episode 3 and Depicts a Huddled Mass of Apprehended Crossers with Agents Standing over Them. The Scene on the Right is from Episode 8; the Crossers' Faces are Blurred Out.

zone. *BW* deploys three strategies in order to prevent the collapse of this fatalist paradigm: dehumanizing the bodies of the crossers, depicting migrants as either dangerous or deserving of pity, and ultimately shifting to another segment to refocus on another danger.

As discussed earlier, the show depicts the border through the perspective of the BP agents. Almost all of the interiority to which the audience is exposed is comprised of the agents' desires, chief among them the desire for the capture of illicit bodies. In order to turn the migrants from recognizable human beings into objects of desire, the show erases their human dimensions.

This dehumanization is accomplished by portraying migrants as elusive and nearly intangible. Most segments depict migrant capture taking place either at night, where the migrants exist like phantoms in the dark, or in harsh desert terrain, where they are difficult to spot in the brush. The show focuses on the aspects of the migrants' somatic existence in order to render them visible. For example, in episode 7, two crossers are caught because of the odor of garlic emanating from them; in episode 3, migrants are caught after agents discover their footprints; in episode 4, agents use infrared scopes to locate the bodies. Despite the "fog of war," agents are able to track down and capture crossers because of uncontrollable bodily aspects—footprints, odors, and heat.

After capture, the show must suddenly contend with recognizable human beings. In order to maintain the show's overall premise, *BW* goes to great lengths to minimize the humanity of these bodies. In some cases, migrants are displayed huddled as a group, and their faces are blurred (presumably to protect their identities). For viewers, this has the effect of making it difficult to distinguish one migrant from the other. In other instances, the show emphasizes the number of migrants caught, referring to them as an aggregate number similar to how they count drugs, money, or bullets found in scenes with car seizures. By referring to captured crossers as a quantity, the show reduces crossers to trophies of the agents' work (Figure 3).

It would be misleading to claim that *BW* erases the crossers' individuality entirely, as *BW* does provide viewers with a more detailed treatment of select crossers once they are caught. This information, however, is presented in

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a way that reinforces the logic of the border as a war zone. By positioning the crosser either as a source of danger or a victim of the war, the agent functions as either defender of the nation or paternal figure who must save the crossers.

Episode 2 provides a stark example of this strategy. A male BP agent receives a nighttime call about a group of crossers. The officers are seen running in the brush trying to track the group. Dramatic music plays as the officers yell to each other, flashlight beams dance, and branches break. The group is caught and the agent repeatedly asks one man in English where he is from. Eventually, the agent asks "Africa? Somalia?" At this point, the show shifts its focus from crossers as a group to one particular crosser and the narrator introduces the element of danger: "[The agent] must determine whether the man poses any kind of threat." The man turns out to be from Ethiopia, and he is taken to the station for questioning. The agent says: "We're trying to ascertain whether or not they travelled through these terrorist countries, maybe they might have come in contact with one of these terrorist groups, maybe they might have actually joined one of these terrorist groups, and so we have to get to the bottom of that." With the assistance of a phone translator, the agent discovers that the man has not travelled through terrorist countries, does not pose a threat, and has fallen victim to human trafficking himself, but viewers are not shown how these facts are verified. The narrator remarks that the agents "will return to the frontlines, to secure the borders," and the segment ends.

Although the audience is exposed to one migrant's individual story, *BW* quickly reduces the complexity of the migrant's reason for crossing the border into one of two different categories: he is either dangerous (because he is related to a terrorist or smuggling organization), *or* is a victim of those dangerous elements. In the example above, the migrant transitions from one category to the other, and no alternative roles are considered. If migrants are dangerous, then the agent's role is clear: defending the nation by controlling these elements. If migrants are not dangerous, then they must be victims, and it is the agent's role to stop the victimizers. The crosser's actual fate, pitiful though it may be, is forgotten as the show refocuses on the idea of danger and highlights the role of the agent as defender/savior.

Despite this, there are times when *BW* permits migrants to speak and describe difficult situations they have lived through. These scenes provide some of the most interesting and ambivalent moments of the show. When the show presents the enemy's interiority, it risks toppling *BW*'s main logic of militarization; it becomes increasingly difficult to support ongoing border militarization when its effects are personalized to an individual. More importantly, sympathizing with the agents' targets prevents the viewer from identifying with agents as protagonists. The show then enters a moral impasse that it must quickly resolve.

Consider an example from episode 4, where two agents respond to a call about crossers moving toward a neighborhood where "they could slip into a safe house." Following a tense search, the agents track down the group to a house. An

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agent walks up the driveway to find an older woman prone on the ground who says she is hurt. The narrator tells viewers the agent will try to track the rest of her group, but first says she must be "looked at". She limps with the agent next to her, and we hear him say, ". . . it's common for the injured or the elderly to stay behind and the smuggler just kind of leave them behind with no regard for their safety." At this point, the woman directly addresses the cameras. She explains she fell on train tracks, and after burying her head in her arm says, "It only hurts that they caught me. It's not that I'm brave. I already tried. It's that my husband is very sick over here. He's American, like all of you. He has prostate cancer. But he has no, how do you say? There is no remedy for him. That was my dream, but . . . And I cannot go on, or else I would have tried again. That is what hurts more than the injury." She weeps a little, and a different agent explains the situation, ". . . she was falling behind, and the smuggler got frustrated with all of them and abandoned. He was already drunk, he was like, 'I don't care anymore I already been paid,' so he left them here and he went back. They're pretty much on their own here." The narrator then explains, ". . . The agents will make sure this woman gets evaluated by a medical professional, but the rest of the group has disappeared." The first agent summarizes that not everyone can be caught and the show abruptly cuts to a different segment with two agents staking out a possible drug shipment.

By presenting the woman's story in her own words, *BW* allows the audience to momentarily sympathize with her. Viewers discover, for instance, how much more upset she is about her apprehension by BP than abandonment by her guide. This revelation deeply troubles the framework of agents as saviors and smugglers as villains. It is not the smuggler, but rather the agent that is the biggest obstacle to her goal. Viewers also learn that her husband is a sickly U.S. citizen. That she will be deported and therefore separated from a loved one who desperately needs her challenges the morality of a border that supposedly plays a protective function. Despite her age and physical vulnerability, she is willing to risk bodily harm to cross the line. This level of desperation suggests that she will probably try again—costing her more money, more physical anguish, and possibly even her life. This presentation may prompt viewers to wonder if the invasive "enemy" is composed of others like her, and if so, who, if anyone, benefits from keeping them out. For a brief moment then, the show entertains a morally ambivalent stance.

Ultimately, in order to sustain the show's logic of the border as war zone, *BW* negates this ambivalence by two main tactics. First, *BW* allows the agent and narrator to have the last word, shifting the audience's identification with the migrant to the show's intended protagonists. At times, the agents express their own sympathy for migrants; other times, they attempt to morally support their actions by rationalizing ideas such as the migrants broke the law or that they will have an opportunity to argue their case in front of a judge. Most frequently, the agents redirect attention back to the show's antagonists: smugglers. Regardless of the migrant's story, viewers now see the situation through the agents' eyes. The second tactic involves quickly redirecting the viewer's attention to the next

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danger, either by transitioning to a tense scene within the segment itself or by cutting to a new segment altogether.

In the example from episode 4, the woman's sad story is immediately redirected by the agent to the true villain—the smuggler who abandoned her even though she may have injured herself on the train tracks while running *from* agents. The show then cuts to the next danger and focuses on two agents searching for drug runners. The woman and her story are forgotten, and her geopolitical or personal reasons for migration never explored. The migrant's story remains as simply another titillating emotional exploitation, an interlude in the action, and nothing more. The ambivalent moment passes, and with it the potential to move beyond infotainment.

The Pleasure of the Seizure: Object Fetishism and Spectacles of Destruction

Just as *BW* is motivated by the desire to "capture" illicit bodies on camera, the prospect of "capturing" illicit objects also drives the show. Oftentimes, the show frames such objects—like drugs and cash—as the centerpiece of a plot line. In the beginning, these objects are hidden and harmful; by the end, agents have brought these objects to light and rendered them harmless. The problem is their ubiquitous but hidden nature, and the resolution is their successful seizure. This framing allows the show to avoid a discussion of both the social processes that led up to the seizure as well as the aftermath of enforcement. Instead, the viewer experiences the pleasure of witnessing agents manipulate illicit objects. Or, the viewer shares in the gratification of an agent physically destroying the problem. Through the fetishism of seized contraband and spectacles of destruction at the moment of seizure, the show naturalizes the "problems" of the border and justifies militarized enforcement practices.

The fetishism of seized objects becomes the central focus of a segment in episode 8 about a highly militarized field operation. Agents engage in a short hunt for suspected drug smugglers in a rural area near Nogales, AZ, and the viewer does not witness most of it. A driver suspected of picking up drugs is quickly apprehended and detained. The seizure of contraband requires little effort; it is in plain view in the car. The "drug mules" turn out to be two unarmed fourteen-year-old boys, who are quickly caught, off camera. It seems that the problem is prematurely resolved. To maintain its momentum, the segment introduces a new problem that can only be resolved through the handling of the "payoff."

Because the drugs are not found on the two boys when they are apprehended, the narrator explains that the agents must collect evidence to help prosecute the young traffickers. The gathering of a key piece of evidence—agents taking photographs of the burlap fibers on the boys' shirts—is shown very briefly. Instead, the evidence-gathering process that consumes a lot of camera time is the process of handling, quantifying, and organizing the contraband.

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The seized burlap bags containing drug bundles are taken into a processing room. There, a small amount of the substance is extracted using the tip of a knife, placed in a small baggie with chemicals, and tested on camera. When the chemical reaction changes color, an agent solemnly informs the viewer that this means it has tested positive for marijuana. As their "final piece of evidence," the narrator explains, the agents must "tally the drugs." An agent places one of the three bundles that were seized onto a scale and then calls out "29.95." As the camera lingers on the three burlap bundles, an agent explains that the "total weight for this apprehension, is going to be 159.90 pounds" and calculates its "street" value at $127,920. An agent who has been central to the operation promises to "be back again tomorrow doing the same thing." The camera pans over the burlap bundles of drugs on the floor. A concluding text indicates that although the driver is charged with drug trafficking and held without bail, the two boys have been released to the custody of their national consulate.

By fetishizing the drug bundles, the show eludes many issues that could denaturalize what has been depicted. For instance, what were the backgrounds of the two children who were apprehended, and are there many others like them? What conditions are making it so that children are willing to work for drug cartels? What will become of these children after they are deported? Other macro-level questions are also left unanswered. For example, why *is* the transnational circulation of these drugs considered "trafficking"? If the destination of the marijuana is the U.S., then how did this market emerge? Why is the route of the drugs through Mexico? Why is crossing of drugs over the U.S.–Mexico border conducted by Mexican cartels, and how have they become such powerful and elusive forces? And finally, to what extent does this militarized presence on the border actually thwart drug smuggling? The answers to any one of these questions would challenge the "natural" quality the show bestows upon the U.S.–Mexico border.

Instead of following such a line of critical inquiry, the show frames the illicit objects as the center of the plot. In the beginning of the segment, these objects of desire are hidden, controlled by powerful others, and may eventually harm "us." By the end of the segment, the drugs have been "captured" (both by BP and on camera) and taken out of circulation. Viewers in the U.S. can rest assured that they are safer than they once were. At the same time, it is merely *one* victory in the larger "Border Wars." The agent declares that she and her colleagues will "be back again tomorrow doing the same thing"—a familiar refrain throughout the season. Although their dedicated efforts have paid off, the agents must continue to seek out illicit objects.

As we have argued above, the fetishization of certain objects forecloses inquiry into the social processes behind them. The focus on illicit objects of desire can also serve another, related purpose: it reinforces the conviction that current enforcement practices are highly justified.

Consider a segment in episode 6 set at the Nogales Port of Entry. A male CBP agent grows suspicious of a U.S. citizen who is trying to drive back into the

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Figure 4. In Episode 6, a Customs and Border Protection (CBP) Enthusiastically Pries off a Vehicle's Roof.

U.S. The fact that the driver is trying to reenter the U.S. through a different city than the one from which he left arouses the agent's suspicion. The agent lists his other suspicions: the driver is nervous and talks "too much"; the driver claims to be going to a Veterans Affairs (VA) hospital in Phoenix rather than one in Tucson; and the car's floor sits too high. Together, these factors merit further investigation of the vehicle, including a canine inspection and measurement of the roof's density. The agent removes a taillight lens, finds an access panel, and lifts it up; bundles wrapped in duct tape are extracted, which the agent guesses may contain methamphetamine crystals. The agent's suspicions are confirmed. Now, the show focuses on the dismantlement of the vehicle.

The agent uses a three-foot crowbar to pry off one of the car's roof panels. As he balances himself on his hands and knees on the vehicle's roof, he pulls out more bundles. He then stands up—still on the roof—and begins forcing off the remaining roof panels with the crowbar, exclaiming "Take out all your aggression on someone else's vehicle, you know? A lot of physical work! This is the fun part!" Thirty-four packages are extracted. The agent opens one of them, and the camera shows a close-up shot of the white-colored crystals inside. The drugs are eventually tested and quantified in weight and value (Figure 4).

Just like the fetishization of contraband, the spectacle of destruction obfuscates more than it reveals. Certainly, the forcible opening of the vehicle brings hidden objects to light. Yet it also obscures the complex social forces at play. For instance, the show never explores why an American is involved in drug trafficking. The fact that he is a U.S. citizen and possibly a Vietnam War veteran complicates the assumptive basis of the "border wars." It suggests that the two sides of the border, and concomitantly, the two sides of the war, are far from clear cut. The revelation that a figure associated with duty and patriotism in the American public imagination—the Vietnam War veteran—is now a foot soldier for a Mexican drug cartel *should* be a startling one for the show. After all, it challenges the show's framing that "threats" originate from without the U.S.'s borders and that the objects of protection are Americans.

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The show does not question what constitutes "suspicious" behavior. The viewer is asked to internalize the agent's perspective; indeed, the viewer *must* trust the agent's judgment because the show depicts successful enforcement as the norm rather than the exception. In this segment, for instance, the ultimate seizure of contraband confirms for the viewer that it *is* in fact suspicious for someone to enter the country through a different port of entry than the one they left from; that there *is* a level of response to officials' questions that is not too little, nor "too much," but just right; and that it *is* strange to opt to drive to a farther hospital. The agent's baseline assumption—which the show adopts—suggests that *all* border crossers, no matter what their personal circumstances, should be viewed with suspicion. In other words, the transnational movement of people, more often than not, is criminally motivated, while conversely, to stay where one "belongs" is morally appropriate.

Once again, the show evades a discussion of either the immediate or historical social processes that led up to this point. We never learn why an American citizen began moving drugs across an international border. Nor do we learn what efforts could prevent others like him from getting involved. Instead, the viewer experiences the gratification of watching the problem get physically annihilated. As the agent destroys the culprit's vehicle, the immediate problem at hand—that large amounts of drugs are about to be smuggled into the U.S.—is also destroyed. The spectacle of destruction, literally, is the solution.

Conclusion

In this article, we have argued that *BW* turns border enforcement into an endless war depicting federal agents as soldiers on a battlefield protecting the nation's integrity against a guerrilla enemy. The show mediates the encounter with the "enemy" by first dehumanizing them, then collapsing them into pitiable or dangerous objects, and finally by evading an exploration of moral questions by constantly shifting to new moments of danger. Finally, *BW* fetishizes the objects—contraband, vehicles, etc.—that agents handle, effectively avoiding discussion of the social processes at play.

That the show serves as a powerful instrument in reinforcing the border spectacle was clear in late 2011, when members of federal and local law enforcement agencies, security consultants, and company representatives of the "border security industry" gathered together at a modest Hilton resort for an annual Homeland Security Conference.[1] It was the first time that the annual conference was being held in Phoenix, AZ, a city quickly fashioning itself into a hub for all matters related to "border security." The best attended and most anticipated session was in the morning. There, Nicholas Stein, the producer of *BW*, gave the keynote address.

Stein began by sharing his surprise at being summoned to speak at a security conference, but the invitation proved to be highly appropriate. Praising the agents' bravery and perseverance, he attributed recent declines in unauthorized immigration to border enforcement. As if to underline the enemy's formidable

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nature, he showed a clip of a BP agent shedding tears at the memorial site of a colleague who had been killed. Technologies like predator drones, Stein maintained, could prevent tragic deaths like these in the future. It seemed that a conference bringing together the frontline warriors with the technology experts was more necessary than ever. Stein's speech was met with a standing ovation. As the clapping died down, a CBP agent addressed Stein. "I think I speak for all 41,000 CBP employees: we're very proud of your success with this show."

This moment captures the iterative relationship that has developed between border enforcement and its media representation. On the one hand, border enforcement needs *BW* because the show essentializes cross-border flows as a persistent threat and depicts the work that agents do as necessary for Americans' safety. On the other, *BW* needs border enforcement to provide the material for the drama that is at the heart of the show. *BW* does not invent warlike conditions at the U.S.–Mexico border. But it allows for a continual performance of that interpretation and reaffirms border militarization as the solution rather than the source of insecurity.

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Notes

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1. The name of the conference has been changed. The observations and direct quote in this epilogue were collected through ethnographic observation conducted by Emine Fidan Elcioglu at the conference, which took place on November 15, 2011 in Phoenix, AZ.

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