



## Appearing ‘out of place’: Automobility and the everyday policing of threat and suspicion on the US/Canada frontier

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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received 30 May 2017

Received in revised form

21 December 2017

Accepted 5 February 2018

#### Keywords:

Homeland security

Borders

Policing

Racial profiling

Automobility

Detroit

### ABSTRACT

Since 2001 the United States Border Patrol's Detroit Sector has grown from 38 agents to 411—the fastest rate of growth of any Border Patrol jurisdiction in the United States (CBP, 2016). Through ethnographic observation, semi-structured interviews and the examination of a growing archive of internal US Border Patrol data obtained via the US Freedom of Information Act, this paper examines the everyday discourses of ‘threat’ and ‘suspicion’ that inform routine enforcement practices by Detroit Sector personnel as they police the US/Canada frontier. It finds that both ‘threat’ and ‘suspicion’ are narrated expressly according to geographic factors of origin, location and direction of travel, scrutinizing bodies and persons that, as an outcome, are said to appear “out of place.” At the same time, according to the Border Patrol's daily apprehension logs, enforcement activity disproportionately concentrates on Latinx residents across divisions of citizenship and immigration status, affecting peoples' everyday ability to circulate through urban and suburban space free from scrutiny, surveillance and the possibility of state violence. To theorize the site and stakes of these outcomes, the paper borrows Stuesse and Coleman's (2014) concept of “automobility” and develops this as an explicitly racial and racializing concept, one that affords an intersectional reading of state violence based on its distributional impacts on peoples' autonomy and control over their conditions of everyday social reproduction. This, then, suggests a need for greater dialogue between literature on immigration enforcement and those concerned expressly with geographies of racial confinement, policing, dispossession and control.

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### Introduction

Less frequently scrutinized than its southwest counterpart, the United States border with Canada has experienced a significant and unprecedented buildup of boundary enforcement infrastructure, technology and personnel over the last decade-and-a-half. This enforcement buildup disproportionately concentrates in particular areas like the US Border Patrol's Detroit Sector, where staffing increased from 38 agents in 2001 to 411 in 2016 (CBP, 2016) – a 981% increase which was, in fact, the fastest rate of growth for any Border Patrol sector in the United States. Once deployed on the country's northern border, agents make everyday tactical decisions about how to operationalize their mission to prevent “terrorists and terrorist weapons, including weapons of mass destruction, from entering the United States,” and to “detect and prevent the

illegal entry of aliens” and contraband (CBP, 2017). Yet it is not clear the logics, discourses, and strategies that inform these everyday enforcement decisions – particularly given the pronounced differences between the operational environment of the US/Canada border and that encountered along the United States' border with Mexico. In other words, how do federal agents construct a geography of “threat” they are then able to police? And what are the outcomes of this process for those US populations who as a result come to experience disproportionate scrutiny, surveillance, and vulnerability to state violence? As Coleman (2016) observes, tackling a question like this raises particularly vexing challenges for social science research, insofar as government agencies within the US Department of Homeland Security place a premium on secrecy or otherwise avoid public scrutiny as a matter of routine (see also Coleman & Stuesse, 2016). For example, Homeland Security is notoriously hostile to outside researchers and journalists (see Belcher & Martin, 2013; Garfinkel, 2014; Hiemstra, 2017; Prendergast, 2017), while little data is publicly available on the scope and geography of Border Patrol activities on the northern

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border – as well as the official policies, imperatives and directives that guide these. Adding to the above challenges is the gap that exists between policy and practice, and the *informality* that characterizes many of the agency's everyday activities – rendering many rank-and-file practices and behaviors obscure *even to those running these institutions*. As an outcome the state becomes, in a sense, secret *even to itself*, a major problem when it comes to routine acts of corruption and abuse (see Boyce, Banister, & Slack, 2015).

This paper proposes to overcome the above challenges via a process of methodological *triangulation*. This is accomplished via the marshaling of internal Border Patrol records obtained through the US Freedom of Information Act; semi-structured interviews with current and retired US Customs and Border Protection personnel; interviews with undocumented immigrants and community leaders in southeast Michigan; and ethnographic observation alongside advocacy organizations as these responded to immigration arrests and met with officials from the Department of Homeland Security. In the process of analyzing the data collected above, the paper makes two distinct contributions. First, it finds that in contexts like southeast Michigan, US boundary enforcement has as much to do with the *internally-oriented* differentiation and policing of US populations as with any outward-oriented project of preventing, interdicting or deterring unlawful cross-border activity. In the process, boundary policing comes to replicate many of the features of those practices that scholars and analysts have more commonly identified as methods of immigration policing specific to the US “interior” (Coleman, 2007; Coleman & Kocher, 2011; Stuesse & Coleman, 2014; Varsanyi, Lewis, Provine, & Decker, 2011; Winders, 2007). Second, the data reveals that it is not only “immigrants” or non-citizens who become targets of police activity, but entire Latinx enclave communities – including many US citizens – who as a result experience heightened scrutiny, detention, and other forms of state violence in the course of their routine circulation in and through the fabric of (sub)urban space. Theorizing the impacts of this proliferation of police activity, the paper affirms the findings of Stuesse and Coleman (2014) that at stake is the question of *automobility* – as both a site of surveillance and interdiction and a set of activities and capacities that become differently distributed across a population. Combining these insights, the paper advances Stuesse and Coleman's work by reading “automobility” as an expressly *racial* and *racializing* condition through which peoples' access to and control over the conditions of work, leisure and everyday social reproduction are mediated via specific logics of policing and related state violence. Such a reading invites analysis of the parallels and connections between those regimes of unfreedom targeting immigrant noncitizens and those impacting other minority and oppressed peoples in the United States; and it carries implications for the ways that US courts are presently interpreting fourth and fifth amendment protections against unreasonable search and seizure and the violation of due process, respectively. Finally, it is argued that empirical and theoretical attention to everyday dynamics of mobility and circulation can offer an important analytic complement to those scholarly frameworks that would prioritize reading the stakes of border controls through the transitional and episodic practice of clandestine border-crossing (e.g. Casas-Cortés, Cobarrubias, & Pickles, 2015; Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013; Moulrier-Boutang, 1998; Papadopoulos, Stephenson, & Tsianos, 2008).

To develop the above, in what follows I first explore the operational context of US/Canada border policing by unpacking how this has been approached by scholars and state actors alike, before then providing a geographic overview and genealogy of the contemporary enforcement buildup specific to the US Border Patrol's Detroit Sector. Next, I expand on the methodological

challenges involved in studying enforcement practices in this operational context, and the ways these challenges are tackled here. Drawing from my fieldwork and a growing and extensive archive of internal Border Patrol documents related to routine enforcement practices, I proceed to unpack the spatial categories, imaginaries and discourses that are recorded as informing everyday enforcement actions and decisions, as well as the outcomes of these activities for those who become its targets. Unpacking these outcomes, the paper returns to the problematics of race, citizenship and status, and their articulation via those everyday practices of mobility that condition peoples' freedom to live, love and work under conditions of their choosing. The paper then concludes with suggestions for further research.

### Homeland security and the problem of the northern border

Since 1994 the United States has experienced a significant expansion of boundary enforcement resources, technology, infrastructure and personnel. Much of this has concentrated along the country's southwest border, where scholars have observed and theorized an unfolding process of “militarization” principally targeted at clandestine migrants, contraband and refugees (Williams, 2015; Doty, 2011; Nevins, 2010; Burridge, 2009; Dunn, 2010). The effects of this militarization have been dramatic, including a spike in the numbers of individuals who have died or disappeared on the journey across the border (Slack, Martínez, Lee, & Whiteford, 2016), along with myriad other forms of violence and abuse (No More Deaths, 2011). Much less attention has focused on the impacts of militarization and enforcement activity along the United States border with Canada, where a provision of the 2004 USA PATRIOT Act mandated that at least 10% of US Border Patrol personnel be stationed. As a result, from 2001 to the present the number of agents deployed along the US/Canada border has grown substantially, from 340 agents to more than 2200 today (CBP, 2016).

Driving this enforcement buildup is a discourse of the northern border as poorly monitored and policed, and therefore vulnerable to exploitation by smuggling networks and aspiring terrorists alike.

This imaginary gained significant traction following the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks when, as Andreas (2005) observes, US border anxieties shifted significantly toward the phantom menace of terrorists and their “weapons of mass destruction,” whose prevention and interdiction would assume priority in the formal mission of the US Border Patrol once the latter was incorporated into the Department of Homeland Security in 2002. In the process, argue Salter and Piché (2011), this “change in policy priorities reflects that, whereas the US-Canada border had previously been viewed as ‘internal’ [in the US security calculation], it was now considered to be ‘external’ and inherently risky” (933). Such a view is reiterated, for example, in a series of US Government Accountability Office reports that have argued that “[t]he Department of Homeland Security (DHS) has been challenged in its efforts to address the threat of illegal activity on the northern border, where the extent of illegal activity is unknown, but the risk of terrorist activity is high” (GAO, 2010a) – a claim supported via a finding that only “69 of the nearly 4000 northern border miles between Washington and Maine were at an acceptable level of control,” and that among these, the Border Patrol “reported a capability to deter or detect and apprehend illegal entries at the immediate border” at only 2 linear miles of the US/Canada border (GAO, 2010b, 11–12). To rectify this ‘problem,’ the GAO has recommended that US Customs and Border Protection (CBP) do more to assess risks along the northern border; acquire surveillance technology, assess its efficacy and optimize its operational deployment; coordinate inter-agency communication with federal, state and community law enforcement partners; and report to Congress on strategic needs and

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