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What is This?
“After 9/11 everything changed”: Re-formations of state violence in everyday life on the US–Mexico border

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Abstract
After 11 September 2001, the state declared a War on Terror, repositioning “Arab-Middle-Eastern-Muslims” as threats to national security, and later broadening its scope to include immigrants crossing the US–Mexico border. This discursive shift propelled the passage of the Secure Fence Act of 2006 (approximately 700 mile barrier between the United States and Mexico) to curtail unauthorized immigration and international terrorism. This article focuses on the effects of militarization on Cameron County, Texas residents living in the Texas Lower Rio Grande Valley as they contend with an assemblage of security apparatuses in their communities. The objective is to move beyond institutional understandings of “the state” and focus on the micropolitics of sovereignty or what I call the state as lived experience. Using ethnographic methods, three manifestations of the state—dispossessor, irrational legal–political force, and arbiter of knowledge—emerge in the everyday lives of residents.

Keywords
Critical theory, lived experience, state theory, US–Mexico border studies

Introduction
When I was 14 years old, my parents drove me to Nuevo Laredo, Mexico, to receive emergency gallbladder surgery. Growing up near the Texas–Mexico border, it was common practice for many working-class and noninsured Americans to address their health needs, shop for clothes, or purchase food en el otro lado (on the other side). Today, nearly 17 years later, the sociopolitical landscape of the US–Mexico border has endured a retransformation as new “nightmares” (Rosas, 2012: 53) of terrorizing dark bodied Others have emerged in the wake of the 11 September 2001 attacks (see

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The War on Terror propelled the passage of the Secure Fence Act (SFA) of 2006 (approximately 700 mile barrier between the United States and Mexico), which has had profound consequences for those living along its path (Haddal et al., 2009: 9). These events set the stage for direct and indirect confrontations between the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and Cameron County, Texas residents living in the Lower Rio Grande Valley.

I characterize these interactions as “the state as lived experience”—localized acts of sovereignty via an assemblage of security apparatuses resulting in latent and/or overt phenomenological effects, shaping the feelings, actions, and social worlds of its subjects (see Ellis and Flaherty, 1992; Holstein and Gubrium, 1994; Merleau-Ponty, 1962). This framework is rooted in a broader sociocultural characterization of the state as an ensemble of discourses, representations, and practices (Aretxaga, 2003; Foucault, 1991; Jessop, 2001; Lemke, 2007; Migdal, 2001; Mitchell, 1999; Navaro-Yashin, 2002; Rose and Miller, 1992; Sharma and Gupta, 2006; Taussig, 1997). These reformations indicate that the art of governing expands beyond the walls of institutions toward a phenomenological “objectivizing process,” (Foucault, 1982: 778), reminding us that the “state is not only a material structure and a mode of thinking, but also a lived and embodied existence, a mode of existence” (Lemke, 2007: 48).

I argue that the interactions between a barrage of security apparatuses (e.g. DHS and Border Patrol) and residents produce multiple reformations of violence and understandings of “the state” in the residents’ day-to-day lives. In this sense, the state is not the reality which stands behind the mask of political practice. It is itself the mask which prevents our seeing of political practice as it is … the state comes to being as a structuration within political practice. (Abrams, 1988: 58)

The aim in this article is to address “how ‘the state’ comes into being … and what effects this construction has on the operation and diffusion of power throughout society” (Sharma and Gupta, 2006: 8). In order to do so, I draw from a multimethod approach comprising 20 semistructured ethnographic interviews with Cameron County, Texas landowners, activists/organizers, and local city and county officials conducted in the summer periods between 2008 and 2010. In addition, I supplement the interviews with participant observations of community protests and textual analyses of state documents and newspaper coverage of the SFA.

The War on Terror and intensifying militarization on the US–Mexico border

The history of the US–Mexico border has been plagued by racialized anxieties that have led to an apparent obsession with US national sovereignty via territorialization. For example, in the late 1920s, US agribusinesses participated in “imported colonialism” (Ngai, 2004: 129) by recruiting Mexican immigrants to work in the fields for paltry wages and subjecting them to terrible living conditions. Thereafter, as visibility of Mexican workers surged, the US-enacted stringent immigration policies and “operations”
that targeted Mexican immigrants. By 1929, the boundary between Mexican (foreigner) and American (citizen) hardened as Congress made unlawful entry into the United States a felony (Ngai, 2004). From “1929-1937, some 458,000 Mexicans were arrested and expelled from the United States without due process, including many legal resident aliens and their U.S. citizen children” (Massey, 2009: 16). A massive sweep of Mexican immigrants and Mexican-Americans reoccurred during the Bracero Program from 1942 to 1964. Hernández (2010) notes, “The project had a massive social impact, rescripting the story of race in America by binding Mexicanos to the caste of illegals” (p. 101).

In the 1980s, the War on Drugs reconfigured the Border Patrol’s relationship with Latinas/Latinos in the southwest, by emphasizing varying levels of violence with their incorporation of a military tactic known as “The Low Intensity Conflict doctrine—a limited politico-military struggle to achieve political, social economic, or psychological objectives …” to gain control of a “lawless” border (Dunn, 1996: 20). These same objectives resurfaced along the border in the aftermath of 11 September 2001, as the War on Terror ushered in the creation of the quasi-military DHS, a colossal security apparatus comprising numerous agencies including US Customs and Border Protection (Border Patrol) and the US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), and entrusted it with the sole responsibility of protecting the nation from terrorism. The DHS has sought “operational control” in the southwestern region by bolstering the number of Border Patrol agents (11,156 in 2005 to 20,119 by 2011), utilizing high-tech surveillance technologies, and reenacting physical infrastructure projects (e.g. fencing) (US Customs and Border Protection, 2006).

Immigration and globalization scholars have pointed to the glaring reality of globalization as a double-edged sword, wherein nationalizing and denationalizing systems appear to be in co-existence, with the former taking on a salient territorializing form on the US–Mexico border. Andreas (2000) characterized the United States as “a borderless economy and a barricaded border” (p. 141). Nevins (2001) also acknowledged that despite globalization “the modern territorial state is far from disappearing … [and] provides an impetus to an enhancement of state power vis à vis national boundaries …” (p. 139). In turn, Sassen (2008) noted that “de-bordering” or “denationalizing” forces have created a partial break down of the national sovereignty system. However, Andreas (2000) has warned that “a liberalizing state is not necessarily a less interventionist state” (p. 7). This background provides a context, as well as a need, in attending to the salience of nationalizing forces and security build-up along the US–Mexico border. My concept of “the state as lived experience” addresses this need by focusing on a “thickening” (Rosas, 2006b: 344) security regime and its impacts on the subjectivities of residents as their lives are rendered a collateral damage in the fight against terrorism.

Pushing beyond institutional walls toward a micropolitics of power

The literature in sociology and political science has traditionally articulated the state as a monolithic institution over and above society (Althusser, 1971; Block, 1996; Dahl, 1961; Evans et al., 1985; Marx, 1967; Mills, 1956; Skocpol and Amenta, 1985; Quadagno, 1984; Weber, 1978). There have been ongoing debates between the “state-centric versus
society-centric” scholars (Domhoff, 1990: 14). More recently, scholars such as Rose and Miller (1992), Migdal (2001), Jessop (2001), and many others have shifted the analytic lens toward understanding how “the modern sovereign state and the modern autonomous individual co-determine each other’s emergence” (Lemke, 2007: 44).

A number of these scholars were influenced by social theorist Michel Foucault (1991: 102) and his concept of “governmentality,” an art of governing that is an effect of the “techniques and procedures for directing human behavior” (Rose et al., 2006: 83). Foucault grappled with a new burgeoning economy predicated on the art of governing populations and its configuration into the state system over time, ultimately, becoming its mode of survival. His notion of the “governmentalization of the state” entailed a method of managing a “complex composed of men and things … men in their relations, their links … wealth, resources, means of subsistence, the territory with specific qualities … customs, habits, ways of acting and thinking” (Foucault, 1991: 93). Yet, Foucault’s philosophizing fell short of fully capturing how this art of government affects the subjectivities of individuals, by neglecting voice or personal experience.

Through their powerful adage of “the personal is political,” feminist scholars have bridged this theoretical gap by using women’s experiences to shed light on the legal forces affecting their lives (e.g. marriage, work, social welfare) and bodies (e.g. reproductive rights), organizing them along gendered as well as racial lines (see Collins, 2004; MacKinnon, 1991; Pateman, 1988; Roberts, 1993; Romero, 2002). In a similar vein, critical race scholars have used the method of counter storytelling against powerful discourses deployed against marginalized Others (Delgado, 1989) and have centered the experiences of African Americans, Latinos/Latinas, and immigrant communities when law enforcement officials have used questionable tactics (e.g. racial profiling), excessive use of force, and unwarranted surveillance (see Correa, 2011; Goldsmith et al., 2009; Jamal and Naber, 2008; Johnson, 2004; Romero, 2006).

In these instances, immigration scholars and others have pointed to tactics of exclusionary citizenship that are carried out by law enforcement agents in their interactions with undocumented immigrants and those they suspect of being in the country illegally. For example, Romero (2008) has described how law enforcement officials use a person’s “Mexicanness” such as dark skin color, Spanish-speaking abilities, and form of dress, to determine whether he or she is an unauthorized immigrant (p. 28). This form of racialized “policability” (Rosas, 2006a: 402) results in an “internment of the psyche … [and that] at any moment, one may be picked up, locked up, or disappeared” (Naber, 2006: 236).

The US–Mexico border continues to exist in a “permanent state of racial emergency” (Michaelsen, 2005: 89). The sociohistorical construction of the border as a lawless and dangerous place coupled with the discourse of the War on Terror has granted the necessary legal space to increase militarization in the region. This has had devastating effects on the region’s inhabitants. These collective frameworks inform my understanding for investigating how an assemblage of security apparatuses (e.g. DHS and Border Patrol), political rationalities (e.g. War on Terror), and governmental technologies (e.g. 18-feet steel barrier and surveillance) seeps into the daily lives of Cameron County residents (Rose and Miller, 1992: 173).
I began investigating the intensifying militarization in the Lower Rio Grande Valley when a major news outlet described a “Texas Showdown” (Meserve, 2008) taking place between Cameron County, Texas residents and the DHS over the appropriation of private lands. Cameron County is situated near the opening of the Rio Grande River into the Gulf of Mexico. As of 2011, the county had a total population of 406,220, 88.1% of which is Hispanic and 10.7% White (US Census Bureau, 2011). Cameron County, like its neighboring counties, has a sizeable colonia community making it one of the poorest in the region. A colonia refers to an indigent community lacking running water, adequate shelter, and paved roads (Ward, 1999).

The DHS proposed a total of more than 70 miles of barrier construction in the Rio Grande Valley, with approximately 35 miles in Cameron County, bisecting predominantly private lands (Ulloa, 2010). Many Cameron County landowners did not fully understand the terminology of the waivers, which resulted in more Declarations of Taking via Eminent Domain among the Mexican-American community, compared to their White neighbors (Wilson et al., 2008). The structure of the barrier—either rust-colored steel pylons or concrete wall slabs—was contingent upon the site and was constructed with intermittent gaps to manage the flows of undocumented immigrants. It was built approximately 100-feet north of the International Boundary and Water Commission’s (IBWC) earthen mound levee system, which runs parallel to the Rio Grande River, and also along many neighborhoods in the area.

Former DHS Secretary Michael declared,

If CBP [Customs and Border Protection] and USACE [US Army Corp of Engineers] determine that the land is suitable for fence-building, they will negotiate with the landowner on a purchase price. If these negotiations are unsuccessful, the government will return to court to seek title and possession … (US Office of the Press Secretary, 2007)

Of the “122 Texas property owners who refused to sell their land to DHS, 97 owned land in the [Rio Grande] Valley” (Maril, 2011: 201). US Border Patrol agents and US Army Corp of Engineers visited more than 600 landowners in the Rio Grande Valley and asked them to sign “friendly condemnation” (US Office of the Press Secretary, 2007). Those landowners who refused to comply with the survey waivers of the DHS were immediately sued. In order to investigate the barrier’s impact in the county, I contacted the Coalition of Amigos in Solidarity in Action (CASA) located in Brownsville, Texas, which assists indigent families facing displacement and/or land dispossession by the DHS. Through CASA, I met Jose and Martha Rodriguez who lived in a colonia. Jose Rodriguez had spent his entire life working as a janitor at a local high school, while Martha devoted herself to raising their children.

After years of working as a high school janitor, Jose was able to save up money to purchase the land and build their home. I began to assist CASA members with measuring the length from the levee to the Rodriguez home when it became clear to us that the couple’s home would not be within a safe zone from el muro (the wall). CASA members solemnly informed the family of the possibility of living in a “no man’s land.” Both Jose and Martha were visibly shaken and with a quivering voice Martha exclaimed, “How can
they [DHS] build it through here? My husband has worked his whole life to build this house and pay for this land. What are we going to do?” I quickly realized that the landowners were contending with a different set of problems and concerns than others who were indirectly affected by the barrier such as the community members and local City and County officials. The state’s wrath pushes beyond institutional walls and affects residents in varying, yet profound ways (see Figure 1).

I used a “go-along method … [accompanying residents] on their ‘natural’ outings, and through asking questions, listening and observing—actively explore the subject’s stream of experiences and practices as they move through, and interact with, their physical and social environment” (Kusenbach, 2003: 456). The go-alongs with residents shed light on intense forms of frustration, stress, and anguish over the dispossession of their land. The dispossession was rooted in the state’s ability to access their lands without consent. Feelings of dispossession were also fueled by collective memories of how the land was acquired and passed on: through colonization, death, or new beginnings. The state seeped into their lives through its interests in their property; however, this seepage posed a serious threat to their livelihood and heavily shaped their identities as Americans.

For instance, landowners who self-identified as Mexican-American and/or Native American recalled stories of how Los Rinches (the Texas Rangers) had used violent land-grabbing tactics to take large tracts of land away from poor Mexicanos (see Rubio, 1986). They believed the SFA was a new form of land grabbing as insecurities increased on the

Figure 1. The backyard of Jose and Martha Rodriguez. The levee is situated less than 100 feet from the couple’s home. A Border Patrol unit was slowly driving by as we helped measure the distance from their home to the levee.
Source. Author photo.
southern border. However, White landowners expressed concerns about the denigration of their freedom and constitutional right to protect their property. The White landowners, unlike their Mexican/Native American counterparts, were staunch supporters of militarizing the border. Yet, when they became aware of the fact that their personal property would be affected by the barrier, they unequivocally changed their minds and began vocalizing other options for securing the border such as more “boots on the ground.” In the following section, I provide two narrative examples of the thematic construct of the state as a dispossessor, which was articulated in two forms by the Mexican/Native American and White landowners: racialized land appropriation and security via loss of freedom.

**Dispossession: Racialized Land Appropriation**

In 1786, the king of Spain granted the San Pedro de Carricitos Land Grant, consisting of more than 12,000 acres in the Lower Rio Grande Valley, to Viceroy Pedro Villarreal (Sieff, 2007; Tamez, 2008). Over a century later and after three governments (Spain, Mexico, and the United States), Eloisa Tamez, 74 years, a descendant of the viceroy and a member of the Lipan Apache, holds tenaciously to the remaining 3 acres of the land grant. Eloisa Tamez’s background differs from the lives of many residents living along the Rio Grande as she managed to escape the clutches of poverty by joining the military, becoming a registered nurse, and obtaining a college degree.

Eloisa Tamez was catapulted into the media spotlight as a force to be reckoned with as she strongly opposed the mandated barrier in her small community of El Calaboz (The Ranch) located 15 miles west of Brownsville, Texas. One day, while Eloisa Tamez was at work, she heard a knock at her door: two Border Patrol agents presented her with a land survey waiver, indicating they needed access to her property. In an interview with a local reporter, Eloisa lamented, “It represents my heritage. This land here is what gave me life” (Marosi, 2011). After refusing access to her land, the DHS sent Eloisa Tamez a letter stating their legal suit against her. Many of Eloisa Tamez’s neighbors looked to her for advice, advocacy, and assistance with legal matters in their interactions with DHS officials. In fact, Eloisa Tamez garnered the support of a pro bono legal defense firm that represented low-income and minority groups and convinced her neighbors to engage in a counter-suit against the state to protect their lands. As Eloisa and I walked together in her backyard, she pointed to the 18-feet steel pylons, and a moment of silence befell our conversation as I stared at the daunting rust-colored structure before my eyes (see Figure 2).

While walking along her property, Eloisa Tamez mentioned that she and many of her neighbors had rarely experienced undocumented immigrants crossing through their properties. She could not comprehend why the DHS decided to build the barrier through her backyard. Eloisa pointed to the rust-colored steel pylons and expressed what the barrier symbolized for her,

To me, it’s a wall! It signifies a barrier between cultures … it has been founded on the denial of human rights … and of equal protection … Even worse is when we found out that the high income Anglo American people who own property in the path of the wall were not subjected to
this pain and suffering … mainly the low income Mexican American communities are impacted … These are ancient ways that are being implemented here … Why is it that the people in the South are the dangerous people? The barrier was built deliberately to harm! We were singled out as the people to harm! They now see us as the enemy.2

Overtones of state racial/ethnic land grabbing were present in Eloisa’s response as she indicated that people of Mexican descent and those from the south have historically been labeled the enemy in matters of national security. Despite being a material object, the barrier symbolized for many, a social division of “us v. them” along racial/ethnic lines. Eloisa Tamez, like other minority residents in the Rio Grande Valley, spent most of her life inhabiting a liminal socio-geo-political space that positioned her (as well as others) “in-between” (Bhabha, 1994: 181) American and foreigner. This liminal status engendered frustration toward the state’s policy in the Rio Grande Valley. The barrier was not only a symbol of racial/ethnic land grabbing but also a tool of dispossession that sought to rob Eloisa Tamez of her familial memories. “I have to depend on those thoughts because these are not things that are written down” asserted Eloisa, “it’s just memories, stories, and oral histories that are passed on down. It makes it very special and gives it meaning as to what is this?”3 At once, the symbolic and material coincide in this statement, as embodied collective memories can be used as powerful sentiments that pull people together, chart a life course, or impact a person’s life decisions: a “structure of possibilities, which helps individuals and groups apprehend not only the past and the present—but also the possible” (Narvaez, 2006: 66), and

Figure 2. The 18-feet steel rust-colored pylons in Eloisa Tamez’s backyard.
Source. Author photo.
a source of strength for landowners such as Eloisa Tamez to draw upon when faced with challenging moments.

In addition, Eloisa Tamez’s narrative disturbs the United States’ definition of democracy as she declared, “You know, my freedom has been taken away from me … this is why people come to America … to be free! Yet we here in South Texas cannot enjoy freedom anymore.” Her admonition that people of Mexican descent are considered dangerous points to a long-standing racialized project culminating in a barrier to keep cultures separate, and by implication, the White culture superior (see Omi and Winant, 1994). The formation of the Texas Republic, along with other southwestern states, was founded on racialized mores and laws regarding Whiteness that were instituted by the Texas Rangers and later the US Border Patrol against the Mexican population (Acuña, 1972; Anzaldúa, 1987; Gómez, 2007; Montejano, 1987). Through the use of negative social constructions such as greasers, barbarians, and criminals, it became increasingly justifiable to appropriate land and murder Mexicans who fought to protect it (Paredes, 1958).

Security via loss of freedom

I left Eloisa Tamez’s property in El Calaboz and drove half an hour east of Brownsville. I stumbled upon a large sign outside a property that read “Langley Farms, Inc.” I decided to stop and ask the owners if the barrier would impact their farm. Debra Langley, 68 years, was outside tending to the family orchard farm since her husband Louis, 72 years, was in the house recuperating from elevated stress levels and heart complications after receiving a survey waiver from the DHS. The Langley family, including their son, Fred Langley, who lived nearby on the farm, owned approximately 800 acres of farmland where they grew citrus fruits, cotton, soybeans, wheat, and cabbage. Debra Langley described how the wall would slice right through the heart of their farm leaving her son Fred and his family on the south side of the barrier. This caused her tremendous anxiety as she believed that this would put the family in danger with “illegals, drugs, and diseases” (Debra Langley, 2009, personal communication). I asked Debra Langley what the barrier symbolized for her, she replied, without hesitation “We are American patriots! … We are not anti-securing the border! That needs to be really clear … We are not that way! Because we live here … securing the border is an important issue. It’s how we secure the border.”

A major concern for the Langley family was the current solution to the national security problem along the border: the erection of the steel barrier right through the heart of their 800-acre farm. Debra invited me to join her for a truck ride through her farm and her son Fred’s property. During the ride, she stressed that the DHS sued her family because they had not given the DHS access to survey their land. Intense physical and emotional duress resonated in Debra Langley’s voice as she stated, “I feel sickened! We will no longer have access to our land!” We drove by Fred’s home and finally to an old faded green and white pavilion near the banks of the Rio Grande River. The pavilion held a special place in Debra’s heart, playing an important role in keeping the family together, as it was used for family events such as birthdays, holiday parties, and Mother’s and Father’s Day celebrations. The family would spend an entire day together listening to
music, playing games, barbecuing, and occasionally taking a swim in the river. Given the location of the pavilion, it would soon be on the south side of the barrier and placed under government ownership in Figure 3.

In the days after 11 September 2001, then President George W. Bush gave all Americans a choice: “Either you are with us or you are with the terrorists” (Bush, 2001). As self-identified American patriots and supporters of the War on Terror, this decision became a colossal emotional paradox for the Langley family as the idea of losing half of the family’s farmland forced them to reconsider the SFA of the DHS:

I thought putting up a fence was a good idea … But, I didn’t realize we would lose control of entering our private property … I feel like my freedom has been violated! We are not anti-securing the border! It’s how we secure the border … it won’t be safe for my family to live here with the fence having Mexico right there! The land, when the fence goes up will be ruined, just ruined. What we’ve had will never be the same again because now we have the freedom to come and go. The government will basically own the entry all the way down the property to get in here.7

Before her husband became ill, Debra Langley recalled a heated argument:

DHS, Border Patrol, and the Army Corp of Engineers met with my husband one morning in our backyard … I went outside and I said, “Are we your guinea pigs?” Each area should be examined carefully not just say, “We are going to throw a fence up here!”

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Figure 3. The pavilion on the Langley Farm. The Rio Grande River is located on the left side.

Source. Author photo.
The Langley family had much to lose if they signed the waiver such as the wonderful memories they built around the pavilion. When I asked what would be in store for the family in the coming months, Debra nervously responded, “There are a lot of things we just don’t know, they [DHS] have uprooted everything, our whole lives have been changed!” In 2010, after a year of legally battling the DHS, the Langley farm was cut in half, leaving the family in a position where they had to ask permission to enter what was once their land. Dispossession through the guise of national security took on both material and symbolic forms, leaving both Eloisa Tamez and Debra Langley with heavy burdens to shoulder. Furthermore, the narratives also point to an asymmetrical distribution of power between Mexican/Native Americans and Anglos, as the former has historically experienced violence and forms of dispossession at the hands of security apparatuses such as the Texas Rangers and the US Border Patrol.

Irrational legal–political force

Working with CASA provided an opportunity to meet with several community members and activists who described the state as an irrational force by crafting legislation that would harm local economies and lead more Americans to view all Mexicans as threats to national security. Elida Garza, 44 years, community organizer for CASA, was born in Matamoros, Mexico, and moved to the United States as a young adult in search of a better job. Now living in the United States, she was fully aware of the hostile racialized discourse about immigrants since the beginning of the War on Terror. “After 9/11 everything changed and so they want to blame us [immigrants] for what happened!” For Elida, the creation of the DHS blurred the lines between immigration and terrorism directly on the backs of immigrants crossing the nation’s southern border. She spoke of an ever-present symbolic and material border existing between the United States and Mexico, structuring the lives of its most vulnerable inhabitants:

DHS wants that dividing wall because they want to create something to protect the country from terrorists, but to the point that even undocumented immigrants moving to El Norte become criminalized in the process. If they become criminalized, that means they are dangerous, and if they are dangerous, we need to put up something to stop them from coming to this country. I think every nation has its right to secure its borders but it’s totally different “securing” a border from “militarizing” it.  

The mission of DHS to secure the border entailed quasi-military tactics (e.g. physical and technological infrastructure) that would ensure “operational control” (SFA, 2006). These tactics transform border zones into war zones and significantly alter the lives of border residents by rendering them mere impediments to national security. Strategies for operational control of the US–Mexico border through technology and manpower also include discursive regimes that racially define dark bodies as dangerous to the United States. These regimes of truth have profound implications for the United States’ racialized imaginary as it manifests itself in policies such as the 287(g) Program by the DHS, which allows local law enforcement officers to use racial profiling in investigatory stops. As Butler (2004) noted, “The result is that an amorphous racism abounds,
rationalized by the claim of ‘self-defense’. A generalized panic works in tandem with the shoring-up of the sovereign state and the suspension of civil liberties” (p. 39). Metaphorically speaking, Elida Garza and other Latinas/Latinos become the intruding “weeds” (Bauman, 2000: 92) that the state must pull out of the US family garden.

In the summer of 2008, the No Border Wall Coalition organized a peaceful protest of more than 300 participants to raise awareness of and demonstrate solidarity in their opposition to the barrier. Protestors alleged that County Judge J.D. Salinas had ignored the public’s outcry against the proposal and acquiesced to plans of the DHS to build the barrier in Hidalgo County (see Figure 4). Wayne Collier, 39 years, an active member of the Lone Star Sierra Club Chapter and the No Border Wall Coalition, addressed the crowd concerning the environmental dangers of building the wall through the Rio Grande Valley. He declared that the DHS Secretary Michael Chertoff flagrantly disregarded the local eco-system by waiving 36 federal laws such as the 1969 National Environmental Policy Act and the 1973 Endangered Species Act. In order to speed up construction of the wall, the DHS sliced through “80,000 acres of wildlife corridor along the last 250 miles of the Rio Grande” (Bartholemew, 2008).

Wayne Collier and other leaders maintained that the DHS and Congress sensationalized an irrational fear of Mexican immigrants to provide justification for the barrier:

**Figure 4.** Protest march at Hidalgo County Courthouse. Protestors are holding up a human-figured sign depicting the County Judge with the word “Còmplice” (accomplice) underneath it. The right hand says “Human Rights?” The left hand says “Democracy?”

*Source.* Author photo.
It’s a politically generated imaginary crisis … All of the nation’s problems stem from those people down there! The fact that unemployment is creeping up and the economy is shaky, the fact that schools don’t have enough funding or that health care is in crisis, those are not our problems … It’s all those immigrants coming across! They are the ones that are to blame! So, let’s put up a wall and keep them out! I find it offensive that we down here would be sacrificed so that people who will never see the border can whip up xenophobia just to get themselves re-elected.11

Key Congress members in the Homeland Security Committee capitalized on xenophobic fears of Muslim-Americans, and later shifted them toward the US–Mexico border, attacking Mexican immigrants as terroristic threats to national security, thus layering an already racialized group given their earlier bracero histories. For instance, in 2005, California Representative, Duncan Hunter, a co-sponsor of the SFA, argued that an increase in surveillance and military presence was necessary in the southern border because “in the age of terrorism, two things are needed: to know who is coming into our country, and what they are bringing with them” (Bennett, 2005). In addition, Texas Republican Senator John Cornyn severely critiqued the DHS for denying Texas further funds to secure the border from spillover violence coming from Mexico into the United States. He later admitted, “As far as the Texas border is concerned, to my knowledge, we have not had spillover violence, per se; It’s more like the threat of spillover violence” (Eaton, 2010). For political gain, Hunter and Cornyn have actively constructed a distorted picture of the US–Mexico border as a hotbed of international terrorism.

Community members like Elida Garza were fearful of the social and economic consequences that would be experienced by poor and working-class Latino families who did not possess the economic capital or social networks to legally resist the DHS. Environmental activists such as Wayne Collier expressed concern over disregard by the DHS of any potential ecological damages in the region by its neglect of environmental laws. The superficial political rationality of the War on Terror entailed a deeper thread of irrationality that negated both human lives and environmental costs.

Arbiter of knowledge

The “rational” character of the state emerged in my interactions with local city and county officials such as mayors, commissioners, and judges in the Lower Rio Grande Valley. As long-time Valley residents, these individuals also possess knowledge of the border: its unique history, culture, and politicoeconomic ties con el otro lado (with the other side). Mayor Roberto Cruz mentioned that many members of Congress and top officials in the DHS lacked historical knowledge of the Rio Grande Valley region and the US–Mexico border in general:

It’s hard for those who do not live along the border to comprehend our way of life, culture, heritage, and traditions. For example, let’s talk about the “crises of immigration … terrorism” with 9/11 … or drug trafficking … In Washington, they look at the problem of immigration and say, “We have a crisis … people are coming through a porous border,” which to them is the southwest border. They decide “we are going to build a fence” to address this national crisis of
immigration … We recognize the problem, but our approach is different … You need to come to the table with local leaders to solve the national problem and you have ignored us!12

Mayor Roberto Cruz’s response demonstrates how the state takes on the role as knowledgeable expert in order to render locals as unintelligible. By publicly stating that there is a crisis on the southern border and dismissing the voices of local officials and residents, DHS officials are able to ignore local knowledge of the area. In addition, the forced role of the DHS as an arbiter of knowledge is predicated on its neglect of the local region’s unique culture and history. Also, this dynamic deems local city and county officials as incompetent in securing the nation’s border; therefore, a vertical power dynamic is created in which the state maintains a stronghold on border matters.

This was a pattern previously addressed by landowners and community members as they shared accounts of the DHS ignoring their concerns and stifling any counternarrative from residents on the ground. Mayor Roberto Cruz was also part of the Texas Border Coalition (TBC), an organization made up of mayors, judges, lawyers, law enforcement officers, environmentalists, and stakeholders who were resisting the mandate of the DHS. Practices of silencing by the DHS through neglect heightened its role as knowledgeable expert, while simultaneously creating an idea of the state as an arbiter of knowledge. In addition, DHS officials only met with select members of local governments, which caused tensions between many local officials thus disabling any plans for solidarity. For example, Cameron County Commissioner Ben Reynolds recalled how the DHS set up meetings with specific city and county officials and left many of the remaining members in the dark with regard to the barrier’s construction. In turn, Commissioner Ben Reynolds could not provide detailed answers for his constituents:

DHS said they needed to fence off of (sic) the urban areas because that’s where people could meld in and hide … We have areas in the city that they don’t have fencing in and then we got spots in the farmlands where you hardly ever seen (sic) anyone and that’s all fenced up. So, it doesn’t make sense, what they said and what they did, like their contracts, their “negotiations,” which they didn’t do much negotiating … then the idea of DHS Secretary Chertoff waiving all of the normal things that most people have to adhere by like the environmental laws and impact studies … all these didn’t count anymore!13

Commissioner Ben Reynolds’s experience illustrates an unbalanced relationship between the DHS and local officials. These interactions are mired in a relationship of what Rabinow and Rose (1994: 72) call “decisional distance,” as local officials only appear to have a voice in matters of policymaking. Local officials encouraged me to visit a local mural to gain a sense of what many residents in Cameron County had to say about the barrier (see Figure 5).

The mural depicts the infamous Berlin Wall reoccurring along the Texas–Mexico border. More importantly, it was a form of resistance toward public claim of the DHS that the barrier was in the best interests of the nation. Despite the knowledge of local officials, the DHS successfully limited any options for dissent and the opportunity to share firsthand knowledge of the region. For example, as previously mentioned, the levee system was designed to prevent flooding in the region. When local leaders such as Mayor Roberto Cruz and Commissioner Ben Reynolds pressed the DHS about flooding
concerns on the south side of the levee, the DHS could provide no adequate response. Instead, the DHS planned to mitigate the damages to “offset adverse environmental impacts without compromising operational requirements” (US DHS, 2008: ES3). In the end, the city and county narratives point to major issues in their interactions with the DHS, exposing unilateral decision-making practices that dismiss inclusivity of local knowledge.

Conclusion

The War on Terror has fashioned a new art of governing by reigniting racialized anxieties of a brown-bodied Other crossing the US–Mexico border with terrorizing intentions of harming the American public. This political rationale has been used to justify an increase in manpower, surveillance, and military presence in the southwest region (Inda, 2006). The interactions between Cameron County, Texas residents and DHS security apparatuses reveal three powerful reformatations of state violence rooted in the dispossession of lands, an infringement of civil liberties, and an assault on their sensibilities as Americans. The residents’ experiential narratives generated palpable “phenomenological realities [that were] … produced through discourses and practices of power, in local encounters at the everyday level … ” (Aretxaga, 2003: 398). These localized acts of sovereignty illustrate the “multiple sites in which state processes and practices are recognized through their effects in day-to-day life” (Trouillot, 2001: 126). Therefore, the state is not a
monolithic phenomenon; rather, it is a socially emergent “transactional reality” (Lemke, 2007: 48) with material effects whose form, stability, characteristics, and moral imperatives are contingent upon the social location of its subjects.

Meanwhile, security apparatuses have widened their gaze to include the entire southwestern border through the use of war-technologies such as Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) or drones to monitor all cross-border human traffic. This poses crucial questions about potential human rights abuses in the use of this technology given the recent (in some cases indiscriminate) killing of Mexican and American civilians by Border Patrol agents. This constant “legitimation-work” by DHS officials projects an image of a state as rational and secure. The concept of “the state as lived experience” serves three crucial functions: First, it demonstrates the multiple formations that security apparatuses take in the lives of border residents as well as their resistance to these forces. Second, it unravels the irrationalities present in the practices of DHS as an assemblage of state-security. Finally, by underscoring the histories in the region, the concept provides a context for understanding how modern national security projects continue to result in unequal intensities of violence and oppression. Scholar-activists such as myself and others, who are concerned with human rights on the border must continue to investigate localized acts of sovereignty-work vis-à-vis assemblages of security by exploring how various communities “perceive the state, how their understandings are shaped by their particular locations and intimate and embodied encounters with state processes and officials, and how the state manifests itself in their lives” (Sharma and Gupta, 2006: 11).

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Notes
1. Martha Rodriguez is concerned that she and her husband will be trapped in a “no man’s land” and therefore may not have access to the city of Brownsville. Pseudonyms are used to protect the identities of my informants.
2. Eloisa Tamez believes the barrier targets and constructs Mexican-Americans as the enemy.
3. Her background as Lipan Apache and Mexican-American is highly shaped by the oral traditions and the memories that have been passed down from generation to generation and provide a sense of purpose.
4. She points to the irony behind being an American, yet not having the right to enjoy the civil liberties bestowed upon a citizen.
5. Debra Langley was a fervent believer that the US–Mexico border was under attack by illegal, 
cartels, and foreign diseases and was in favor of securing the border.
6. Despite Debra’s strong convictions for securing the border, she did not believe the barrier was 
the solution because it took away access from landowners.
7. Debra fears for the safety of her son and his family who will end up on the south side of the 
barrier.
8. After the heated meeting, the Langley family was still left with many unanswered questions.
9. Elida Garza described this discursive shift as political justification for militarizing the border 
at the expense of undocumented immigrants.
10. She points to the power of language and stigmatization of immigrants by the Department of 
Homeland Security (DHS).
11. Wayne Collier points to the government’s role in creating irrational fears of the Other along 
the border.
12. Mayor Roberto Cruz discusses DHS’s neglect of local knowledge in order to maintain its 
position as expert.
13. Commissioner Ben Reynolds mentions the ways in which DHS circumvented laws and regu-
lations in order to maintain sovereignty in the region.

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