

VIGILANT PATRIOTS OR VIGILANTES: A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF THE
MINUTEMAN CIVIL DEFENSE CORPS' WEB SITE

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Dedication

This work is dedicated to my parents, Bea and Harold Ballard. Without their loving support, patience, personal sacrifice, and pet-sitting, I would not have been able to pursue my education.

PREVIEW

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by

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PREVIEW

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Abstract

This thesis is a critical discourse analysis of the public web site published by the civilian border patrol organization known as the Minuteman Civil Defense Corps. This paper addresses recent historical developments related to the “immigration debate” and provides an overview of the conflicted space of the United States and Mexican borderlands. Fisher’s (1984) narrative paradigm frames this inquiry, and critical discourse analysis is used to investigate the ideologies that emerge from a critical reading of artifacts contained in the Minuteman web site. Findings suggest that a dichotomy exists between the Minuteman organization’s self-perception as a non-racist social action group, and the web site of study, which contains materials that convey ideologies of race, class, nationalism, and the struggle for power over marginalized peoples. Limitations are addressed and ideas for further study are provided.

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The turn to narrative in social science studies has fostered the concept that talk is constitutive, that talk creates action in terms of the phenomena that are constructed discursively (Czarniawska, 2004; Fong, 2004; Rostek, 1999; Sarbin, 2004; Wood & Kroger, 2000). Austin's theory of speech acts (1962) explains that utterances not only have a certain meaning, they also have a generative power--they not only are *about* things, they *do* things (Czarniawska, 2004). Fisher's (1984) narrative paradigm builds upon the notion that talk is action and the paradigm conceptualizes human narrative as a series of stories. Fisher (1984, 1987) posits that we are all essentially storytellers and that our communication should be viewed through the stories that we live and tell. However, the use of the narrative lens for understanding communication need not concern talk alone. Fisher (1985) proposes that the narrative paradigm is a workable tool for viewing *all* human communication, oral, textual, or technical. Critical analyst Norman Fairclough (2001) also notes that the analyses and interpretation of human communication includes considering the *semiosis* (various methods of meaning-making, which include language, nonverbal language, and visual images as signs) of human communication in order to gain a more complete understanding of its intent and content.

Analysts of narrative--textual, visual, or oral--express an interest in people's lived experiences. The stories that people tell constantly evolve, each building upon the last. In the act of interpreting narratives of others, investigators essentially construct a new narrative of their own (Elliott, 2005; Fisher, 1984, 1987). Researchers have assembled a toolbox filled with various components of theory, perspective, and method to frame their empirical analyses. For example, the exploration and analysis of conversations, texts, and artifacts all contribute to investigations of how identities of individuals, groups, and societies are rhetorically constituted (Elliott, 2005; Stubbe, et al, 2003). Although this constructionist approach to identity is often found in the literature, narrative inquiry also offers critical insight into how phenomena such as race, class, nationality, and power structures are constituted, perpetuated, and resisted through communicative acts (Atkinson, 2006; Czarniawska, 2004; Debeaugrande, 1999; Elliott, 2005; Fairclough, 1992; Fong, 2004; Rostek, 1999; Sarbin, 2004; Wood &

Kroger, 2000). It is the narrative (and semiotic) construction of these phenomena as they occur in the context of the public web site of the civilian border patrol group known as the Minuteman Civil Defense Corps (hereafter referred to as “the Minutemen” or “Minuteman”), that is the focus of this exploratory study.

Walter Fisher’s (1984) narrative paradigm and critical discourse analyses (CDA) are used as intersecting frameworks to direct this inquiry. This purpose of this study is to explore the construction of ideological phenomena which is evident in the artifacts of the Minutemen’s web site, and to advance inquiry into the nature of the current public argument on immigration and border security issues. The U.S.-Mexico border as site for contested space has both physical and symbolic manifestations. It can be said that the Minuteman organization was formed as the action consequence of *a priori* symbolic construction. Just as there is a physical line that divides the border, there is also a rhetorically constituted division among groups and individuals with opposing ideologies. These ideologies can be found residing in the narratives (texts) of the group’s cultural production (Fairclough, 1992). This study will explore the artifacts of one of these groups-- the Minuteman Civil Defense Corps.

There are several reasons why it is important to study the narrative artifacts of this group. The first is to direct inquiry and understanding into the communication practices evident in the current conflict symbolized by the border and the Minutemen. Narrative inquiry can contribute to the way in which people talk. Talk is action and identifying certain practices that perpetuate certain actions can help to change the practice (Wood & Kroger, 2000). Awareness of sexism in talk, and the changes in our language usage that it has generated, is one example of how this can work (Wood & Kroger, 2000). Secondly, the information we have about the highly visible and controversial Minuteman organization consists mainly of mediated portrayals. There has been no structured investigation of the Minutemen to date. It is important that we critically examine the communicative acts of this group. Finally, we need to understand the points of view, the ideologies, the arguments, and the resistance narratives found in the stories of the Minutemen, a group which is deeply engaged in the public debate regarding immigration.

By doing so, we can make a more informed decision about whether to confront or support the arguments the Minutemen present. It is also important to consider that this particular struggle may be representative of other conflicts found in other contexts, and learning about one may translate into deeper understanding of another. This initial exploration of the textual and visual narratives of the Minutemen hopes to bring a better understanding of one piece of the intricate puzzle that constitutes the conflicted space of the U.S.-Mexico border.

The contents of this study are organized in the following manner. The paper begins with a review of literature that situates a contextual and historical overview of developments in the U.S.-Mexico borderlands. Next, there is a discussion of the advent and history of the Minutemen. The extant literature regarding the organization under study is primarily found in journalistic sources. These sources, along with information found on the organization's web site are used to present an overview of the Minuteman organization and the current events surrounding their genesis and history.

A review of the theoretical concepts used to frame this inquiry then follows. Research questions that guide the study and a section outlining the methods used to gather and analyze data are then presented. The next section is an analysis of artifacts found on the Minutemen's web site, which is then followed by a discussion section. The paper concludes with a section on limitations and suggestions for future research. The following section presents an overview of the historical touchstones regarding immigration across the U.S. border with Mexico.

Immigration across the Southern Border

The migration of labor from Mexico across the United States border has been in place for many decades. The enactment of immigration legislation by the U.S. government changed the characteristic of the free flow of labor across the border to that of the now problematized “illegal” immigration (Inda, 2006). Prior to the advent of the Immigration Acts of 1917 and 1924, people were able to cross the U.S.-Mexico border with relative ease to work in such jobs as construction, agriculture, and mining. The Immigration Act of 1917, its genesis derived from the current of anti-immigrant sentiment in the U.S. at that time, imposed restrictions and obstacles upon immigrants wishing to cross the border (Acuña, 1999; Inda, 2006). Monetary encumbrances such as a head tax and a visa tax made migrating legally to work too costly. Even more daunting than the monetary impediments were the humiliations of the medical exam requirements of the new law. Immigrants were made to parade past a medical panel and were often sprayed with chemicals for de-lousing (Inda, 2006). The result of the Immigration Act of 1917 was a decline in “legal” immigration as workers either did not cross the border for work, or chose to forgo the official crossing points altogether (Inda, 2006). The Immigration Act of 1924 is the legislation responsible for instituting a more rigorous deportation system, and the birth of the U.S. Border Patrol--the agency charged with the enforcement of the new statutes by finding and deporting “illegal” immigrants (Acuña, 1999; Inda, 2006).

During the years of World War II, labor shortages in the U. S. prompted the initiation of a guest worker program with Mexico. Known as the bracero program (1942-1964), it was meant to ameliorate temporary labor shortages (primarily in agriculture) through the war. Mexico often objected to the treatment of its labor force under the program, but was ultimately unsuccessful in negotiations with the U.S. to ensure fair pay and treatment of bracero labor (Acuña, 1999). Agribusiness was reluctant to give up cheap bracero labor and pressured the government to keep the program running until 1964 when, under the pressure of domestic labor unions and Chicano organizations alike, the program was allowed to lapse (Acuña, 1999; Cerrutti & Massey, 2004; Inda, 2006; Sierra, 1999). Inda (2006) suggested that

the infrastructure put into place to facilitate the logistics of the bracero program worked to increase the network and access of immigrants to U. S. jobs, the effects of which we still see today in increased immigration from the interior of Mexico.

In 1954, there was rising public awareness that many agribusiness employers preferred using cheaper undocumented labor rather than hire braceros. There was also a resurgence of the now familiar anti-immigrant sentiment (voiced as fears that immigrants were taking jobs from Americans and were the cause of a litany of social problems). In consequence, “Operation Wetback” was launched by the U.S. government (Acuña, 1999; Cerrutti & Massey, 2004; Inda, 2006). The operation resulted in the deportation of nearly 4 million Mexican immigrants. Undocumented immigration to the U.S. declined significantly thereafter (Inda, 2006).

More immigration legislation was passed in the U.S. in the years that followed Operation Wetback. The Hart-Cellar Act of 1965 was designed to do away with the discriminatory national origins quota system of the 1920s. However, its literal effect was to place a cap on the number of immigrants allowed from the Western Hemisphere, where no cap had been in place before (Cerrutti & Massey, 2004). The Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 contained provisions to enhance the U.S. Border Patrol, to enact sanctions against employers of undocumented workers, and to offer an amnesty to long term undocumented immigrants (Cerrutti & Massey, 2004; Inda, 2006). In the wake of the passage of this act, a series of “crackdowns” of the border took place. With names such as “Operation Hold-the-Line” and “Operation Gatekeeper” a new militarization of the border with Mexico had begun (Cerrutti & Massey, 2004).

Regardless of legislation and increased border control efforts, migration to the U.S. from Mexico has increased in intensity in the past few decades (Cunningham, 2004; Passel, 2005, 2006; Passel & Suro, 2004). Standards of living in Mexico have deteriorated in recent years, due in part to the economic changes brought about by the North American Free Trade Agreement (Cunningham, 2004). Although the analysis conducted by Pick, Viswanathan, and Hettrick (2001) indicated that northern Mexico has fared