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## Disrupting 21st-Century In/Security

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### ABSTRACT

This thematic issue probes into twenty-first-century security concerns in the United States, Canada and Mexico, and their transnational implications. In particular, it explores three tensions that characterise contemporary security concerns: national security vs. human security, policy measures vs. grassroots activism and scholarly discourses vs. artistic interventions. The 'War on Terror' launched by President George W. Bush marked the beginning of the century with issues of violence and insecurity, with major human rights ramifications. Grassroots activists, however, have resisted the imposition of security policy and stood up to the insecurities they face. This thematic journal issue discusses questions of in/security around a robust people-centred framework that delineates questions of insecurity as a complex nexus that intertwines policy-making, everyday experiences, cultural representations and formal and informal communication networks. This focus presents an alternative to more conventional approaches that examine issues of societal in/security solely from the viewpoint of nation states and law enforcement. The collection's case studies address the ways in which ordinary people in a transnational North American context experience questions of insecurity. The articles highlight the central position of gender, race, class and sexuality in both strengthening and challenging danger, uncertainty and liminality.

### KEYWORDS

Transnational North America; grassroots activism; art activism; human rights; insecurity; the body; space social media

This thematic issue probes into twenty-first-century security concerns in the United States, Canada and Mexico, and their transnational implications. In particular, it explores three tensions that characterise contemporary security concerns: national security vs. human security, policy measures vs. grassroots activism and scholarly discourses vs. artistic interventions. A century that began with terrorists hijacking commercial airliners and crashing them into the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon in Washington, DC – the most powerful symbols of US economic and military might – would have consequences of inconceivable magnitudes. The 'War on Terror' launched by President George W. Bush was a powerful metaphor that turned public opinion for the war in Afghanistan and Iraq, despite no evidence of connections to al-Qaeda, the 9/11 attacks, or weapons of mass destruction. The imposition of *The Patriot Act* by the US Congress in October 2001, with power to spy on citizens, install wiretaps, listen to phone calls and read emails without the subjects'

knowledge, created a sense of insecurity among citizens that was comparable to the 1950s red scare. The distrust between policy-makers and ordinary people was heightened by the fact that US citizens could be detained indefinitely as enemy combatants. The Department of Homeland Security, created in 2002, took as its mission to prevent 'terrorism and enhancing security; managing [US] borders; administering immigration laws; securing cyberspace; and ensuring disaster resilience' (<https://www.dhs.gov/our-mission>). The Department's colour-coded system of different levels of terrorism threat was used by local, state and federal agencies to signal security alerts at airports and other public facilities. The Guantánamo Bay detention camp (GTMO) became the infamous military prison housing terrorism suspects on the US Naval Base in Cuba.

The United States saw a paradigm shift in border security policy, when the US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) created the National Fugitive Operation Program (NFOP) under the Department of Homeland Security. This resulted in increasing militarisation of the US–Mexico border, complete with 700 miles of fencing erected along the border and an agenda to locate and apprehend undocumented and 'terrorist' aliens (Ackleson 2005; Andreas 2003; Winders 2007). While the rationale for the securitisation of the border was to make people feel 'safer', as a result of the policy change, immigrants in the United States became targets of state-level search and seize operations for alleged links with terrorism (Heiskanen 2009). The US–Mexico border region, in particular, became an area where national security interests led to human rights violations on both sides of the border. In Mexico, reconsiderations of national security strategies led to the formulation of the *National Security Law* in 2005. Although the purpose of the law was to grant protection and rights to citizens, in practice, it focused on migrants in the context of the Mexico–US border (Calleros 2010). This border securitisation agenda effectively undermined the development of human security goals, such as those established by the Organization of American States' Declaration on Security in 2013. The conflict between state-centred security and its human dimension has been at the crux of US–Mexico security concerns (Buscaglia 2012; García and Marquez 2013).<sup>1</sup>

The issue of security intensified again in both Mexico and the United States at the beginning of 2006, escalating in 2008, when the Mexico–US border region saw a wave of violence emerge because of a turf war between drug trafficking cartels (Barry 2011; Bowden 2010; Campbell 2009; Heiskanen 2014; Bunker 2011). Both the United States and Mexico responded to the violence primarily as a national security issue. The United States focused on securing the border against a possible spillover of violence; in Mexico, military forces were sent to the troubled regions. Citizens of both nations were also impacted by increasing use of drones for surveillance. As a result of these security threats, the United States saw the most fervent reactionary backlash resulting in the curtailing of both immigrant rights and citizenship rights in the United States (Cornelius 2005; Cornelius and Lewis 2007). On the Mexican side of the border, the reorientation of national security and migratory policies had a great impact on citizens, as the focus on border security was steered towards 'anti-terrorist' measures at the expense of human rights (Castillo 2005). Various grassroots organisations were forged to express disapproval of these measures as well as the use of drones to the detriment of border residents.

The US 'War on Terror' also extended directly into Canada. Once known as the world's longest unprotected border, Canadians now require passports to enter the United State and face tough security scrutiny. However, in their efforts to defend borders, Canadian and US

intelligence services have moved *beyond* national borders, allowing customs and intelligence officers to work in both countries to screen potential terrorism (*Beyond the Border Action Plan* 2011). After 2006, the Canadian government, under the leadership of Stephen Harper, designed its own powerful counter-terrorism surveillance mechanisms. These have included the controversial 2015 *Anti-terrorism Act* (Bill C-51.) The Act, comparable to *The Patriot Act*, expanded the powers of the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS) to gather and share information, enabling law enforcement to make arrests without warrant, when terrorist plotting was suspected (Bécharde et al. 2015). Human rights critics continue to fear that, in practice, Bill C-51 targets environmental and Indigenous activism that challenge the government's economic priorities (Bronskill 2015; Diabo 2015; Palmater 2015).

On global and local levels, measures related to the 'War on Terror' resulted in racial profiling, conflation of immigrants and terrorists and curtailing of individual rights, with major ramifications on freedom of speech and assembly, policy-making, immigration laws and inter- and intra-group tensions. People, however, have resisted the imposition of security policy and stood up to the insecurities they face. In this issue, we want to discuss questions of in/security around a robust people-centred framework that delineates questions of insecurity as a complex nexus that intertwines policy-making, everyday experiences, cultural representations and formal and informal communication networks. This focus presents an alternative to more conventional approaches that examine issues of societal in/security solely from the viewpoint of nation states and law enforcement. The collection's case studies address the ways in which ordinary people in a transnational North American context experience questions of insecurity. The articles highlight the central position of gender, race, class and sexuality in both strengthening and challenging danger, uncertainty and liminality. The articles of Heide, Heiskanen and Saramo, in particular, cause us to reflect on the ways that people defy restrictions on mobility, be it due to national borders, organised crime, or gender, class and racially inscribed social zoning. Instead, people utilise their individual and collective agency to (re)claim space, resisting the imposition of in/security. In many of the examples used, the body becomes a locus of power relations and a site within which questions of in/security are contested. Stephanie Sparling Williams discusses the appropriation of the female body for military deployment and artistic intervention. Saramo, Heiskanen, Chernega and Whitney call attention to the body as a site of physical violence. In Heide's article, 'Repossessing Border Space', we see the powerful ways that artists have embodied border spaces, transforming political security discourses into lived experiences, by representing people's border crossings.

A tension between state measures and grassroots interventions is a central dynamic in such experiences. Grassroots movements, including Occupy, Black Lives Matter, Idle No More, as well as civil disobedience movements, such as Women in Black, Not One More, Movement for Peace with Justice and Dignity and We Are All Ayotzinapa, have directly challenged the inequity and violence of political, economic and societal structures, and have had a significant impact in bringing awareness of issues on insecurity on a grassroots level in North America. As we see in the articles by Saramo, Heiskanen and Chernega, there is a sense of urgency and that people are fed up with waiting for the government to act on their concerns and to enact real security. Various forms of social movements, then, ranging from citizen activism to art activism are at the crux of finding ways to challenge insecurity and to effect change. The North American examples analysed here can be seen in light of broader global grassroots movements, often led by women, countering gender, racial, environmental,

economic and inter/national insecurities (Banaszak 2005; MacGregor 2006; Rocheleau, Thomas-Slayter, and Wangari 1996; Zobl and Drüeke 2012). While Chernaga, for example, highlights highly public demonstrations against racialised police violence, Heiskanen's research reveals the more intimate, perhaps less obvious daily resistances employed, in this case, by residents on the Mexico–US border. In this collection, Sparling Williams employs the concept of 'speaking out of turn' to analyse artist Coco Fusco's parallel critique of the US military's use of women in interrogation and the art world's refusal of feminism. 'Speaking out of turn', or what Sparling Williams defines as a 'grassroots methodology of those rendered silenced and invisible', resonates with the diverse causes, activisms and disruptions analysed by the collection's articles. An examination of grassroots activism also reveals the multitude of emotional responses to insecurity, including frustration, grief and guilt. Delving into the complex negotiations of emotion, place and power, the articles here contribute new perspectives to the expanding study of activism's affective dimensions (for example Brown and Pickerill 2009).

The organisation of this thematic issue underscores the intersecting questions of everyday experiences and artistic representations/performance. The artistic forms utilised vary greatly, including solo and direct address performance, sculpture, poetry, installation, photography and handicraft. Art-activism and 'craftivism' serves as an important modus of political intervention in urban space, one which not only has both tangible social consequences, but which also transforms physical space (see for example Buszek and Robertson 2011). The articles problematise a range of contemporary security crises from the perspectives of national security and human security. The point of departure is that contemporary societal crises should not be narrowly viewed as issues of national security, as they always necessarily entail questions of local/global human rights as well. Consequently, policy-making alone can never explain ongoing security crises; it is necessary to complement such measures by human security considerations. Activist art is an important grassroots form of visual intervention to influence public opinion about societal crises that actions by nation states alone fail to resolve; it also exposes multiple linkages between the grassroots realities, public responses and cultural expressions in the spatial contexts within which they are exhibited. As the activist statements spread through social media, they quickly reach a global audience and significance.

The articles delineate the ways in which various groups of people – citizens, scholars and artists – experience and conceptualise the significance of activist art in public space and various geographic contexts. We also call attention to the ways in which various groups of people appropriate urban public space for the politics of representation and activist agendas. Finally, the specific case studies examine the theoretical conceptualisation of security crises and their responses in North America, with ramifications on a global scale. With these examples, the issue demonstrates activist art as an important modus of political discourse in crises zones that have tangible social consequences for millions of people locally and globally. This visual-spatial focus elucidates public space as a symbolic and de facto battleground for various, often conflicting, agendas. Various groups making statements about security crises may appropriate public space to call attention to the ongoing events. The activist artistic statements serve multiple purposes: to express outrage and solidarity towards the victims of the crises; as personal interventions to bring visibility for one's agenda; or to present a collective refusal of silencing vis-à-vis existing power relations. The case studies shed light

on questions regarding the politics of representation, individual and collective agency and experiences of social space.

Social media has become a key tool for grassroots activism globally (Gerbaudo 2012), and plays a vital role in the movements analysed here. Through its connective power, online networks allow social movements to gain visibility and momentum. Through the creation of spreadable content (Jenkins et al. 2009), such as images and hashtags, social media has facilitated the emergence of new ‘virtual cosmopolitanism’ and ‘cosmopolitan solidarity,’ (Sobre-Denton 2016) joining together activists and supporters from far and wide. Social media functions as a platform for protest and activism, through the proliferation of hashtag campaigns, online petitioning and message spreading, but social media also facilitates on-the-ground manoeuvring. This complementary intersection of online and offline organisation and demonstration have changed the dynamics of grassroots activism. As argued by Jeffrey Juris: ‘It is clear that new media influence how movements organize *and* that places, bodies, face-to-face networks, social histories, and the messiness of offline politics continue to matter’ (Juris 2012, 260). The collection’s articles show how this operates in the daily lives of people in the El Paso–Ciudad Juárez region, and for Black Lives Matter and Canadian #MMIW activists, organising vigils and protests. Social media expands the local, bringing the disruptive/activist work of visual and performance artists, such as Susan Harbage Page, Coco Fusco, Ricardo Dominguez, Dynasty Handbag and M. Lamar, to broad audiences. Heide, Sparling Williams and Whitney’s articles are examples of such disruptive/activist work. Social media can also serve as a site for mourning and commemoration, bridging mass activism and intimate connections to injustice. This journal issue demonstrates some of these personal-public functions of social media on the grassroots level.

The thematic issue provides six case studies, three focused on grassroots activism and three on artistic interventions, which collectively demonstrate people’s power and creativity in disrupting the varied insecurities they confront in their daily lives. Stephanie Sparling Williams examines performances of insecurities through Coco Fusco’s direct address art and interrogation in the ‘War on Terror’. Sparling Williams uses Fusco’s 2006–2008 multimedia performance art piece, *A Room of One’s Own: Women and Power in the New America*, as an entry point for analysing ‘power, surveillance, silence, and the making and performances of particular kinds of citizens/subjects/enemy combatants/art objects/interrogators/artists’. Fusco’s work challenges us to think about the use of women in military interrogation at the same time as considering the place of women, especially women of colour, in the US art world. In doing so, Fusco and Sparling Williams’s article demonstrate the entanglement of art, visual culture and US military security discourses. The article calls attention to the relationships between race and national security, national security and feminism, as well as race and feminism.

Markus Heide’s ‘Repossessing Border Space: Security Practice in North American Border Art’ examines how formal security surveillance, people’s encounters with the border, and art intersect. Analysing works by Annie Han, Daniel Mihalayo, Susan Harbage Page and Ricardo Dominguez, the article considers varying artistic representations of border space and how art ‘interrupts border security practices and their rituals’. Analysing Ricardo Dominguez and The Electronic Disturbance Theater’s 2008 *Transborder Immigrant Tool* (TBT), which used GPS-mapped experimental poetry to lead undocumented immigrants to drinking water in the US–Mexico borderlands, Heide demonstrates how they, much like Coco Fusco, cause us to question the lines between security policy/practices and the art establishment.

The article shows how, collectively, these artistic interventions ‘symbolically repossess’ the border for migrants, highlighting the danger and humanity of border crossing.

Samira Saramo’s article examines grassroots activism surrounding the crisis of missing and murdered Indigenous women, girls and Two-Spirit people in Canada. Though estimates vary, over the last 30 years, 1000–4000 First Nations, Inuit, or Métis women were murdered in Canada, and more than 100 are still missing. However, the Canadian government has not addressed the economic, social and environmental colonialism that has allowed this violence to become naturalised. Focusing on activism during the years of the Conservative Harper Government, this article examines how these grassroots initiatives challenge Canadian politics, reclaim streets and liminal zones, and make space for sacred commemoration. Specifically, Twitter campaigns, meme-ing, and the art installation projects *REDress Project* and *Walking With Our Sisters* are studied. Engaging with scholarship that analyses spaces of violence, Saramo contributes a discussion of how activism can unsettle violence by transforming physical, virtual and affective spaces.

Benita Heiskanen’s “‘We Were All Involved’: The ‘Great Violence of 2008–2012’ on the El Paso-Ciudad Juárez Border”, draws on 54 interviews and 22 written testimonies to discuss border residents’ experiences with violence. Heiskanen argues that the intersection of spatiality and agency is central in conceptualising experiences of security/insecurity. The physical sites border residents had access to – or were denied entrance to – had a fundamental significance for their everyday existence. By the same token, the refusal to succumb to spatial restrictions, or claiming space for oneself despite ongoing atrocities, served as an empowering way to deal with the threat of violence. The article demonstrates how spatial strategising provided tools with which the various parties involved exercised their agency in imposing, coping with and countering violence. The discussion concludes by problematising the intersecting issues of agency, involvement and complicity as broader ethical and epistemological questions invoked by the study of violence.

Jennifer Chernega’s article provides a timely overview of Black Lives Matter (BLM) activism in the United States. Beginning with the events surrounding the August 2014 shooting of 18-year-old Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, ‘Black Lives Matter: Racialized Policing in the United States’ examines grassroots activism and the increased media scrutiny of police interactions with people of colour in the United States. Chernega employs social movement theory to assess the nature of the Black Lives Matter movement in contrast to the earlier Civil Rights movement. The article considers the central role that social media and the hashtag #blacklivesmatter played in drawing national and international attention to racialised police violence. This demonstrates how BLM grassroots activism has successfully made visible long-standing insecurities in black communities across the United States.

Elizabeth Whitney’s ‘The Dangerous Real: Queer Solo Performance in/as Active Disruption’ frames queer solo performers as ‘artistic activists’, who challenge the imagined US national identity through queering. As Whitney writes, ‘like all radical community endeavors, queer performance in the United States has been shaped through resistance to restrictive ideologies’. Whitney utilises the 1990s ‘indecent wars’ and the case of the NEA Four to situate her study of three contemporary artists, Dynasty Handbag, M. Lamar, and Erin Markey. First, analysing the concepts of ‘queer’, ‘solo’ and ‘performance’, the article goes on to examine the ‘dangerous real’ – the precarity and vulnerability – of queer solo performance. Through studies of the three disparate artists, Whitney asks how their work disrupts US insecurities concerning intersections of sexuality, gender identity, race and religion.

## Note

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## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

## Notes on contributors

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**Samira Saramo** is Post-Doctoral Researcher at the University of Turku's John Morton Center for North American Studies and holds a Ph.D. in History from York University in Toronto, Canada. Saramo's research examines violence and activism in varied historical and contemporary contexts, including among the early-twentieth century North American immigrant Left, in Soviet Karelia and in contemporary US and Canadian politics. Saramo examines issues in ethnic, gender, childhood and family histories, as well as uses of memory, emotion and representation in life writing.

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