



BOOK REVIEW

Waiting for José: The Minutemen's Pursuit of America

By Harel Shapira. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013. 208 pages.

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Waiting for José uncovers the practices and motivations of those who form the ranks of the Minutemen — a U.S. anti-immigration movement that has garnered national attention over the past decade for its voluntary border patrols and anti-immigration campaigns. By liberal media accounts, the Minutemen are often depicted as xenophobic vigilantes; while in the eyes of the conservative media, they are heroic patriots. The Minutemen's website boasts their mission as “bringing awareness to the illegal alien invasion,” and describes their efforts to protect American jobs, fight against fraud (they claim that “millions of illegal immigrants are getting a bigger tax refund than you”), and stop unlawful immigration. Whether readers are sympathetic to or enraged by the Minutemen's political bravado, they will be captivated by Harel Shapira's work helping us understand them.

In many ways, *Waiting for José* feels like an experiment in radical empathy. Is it possible to truly understand the motivations of those who patrol the border, often armed, waiting to encounter would-be immigrants? The success of Harel Shapira's work is that by

the end of the book we have (perhaps even unwittingly) done just that.

The book begins by inviting us to dismantle our most basic assumptions about the Minutemen. Then, through rich ethnographic work, it rebuilds our understanding of who they are, and why they do what they do—which as the book's title points out, is less about what the public imagines (i.e. “capture” or otherwise encounter immigrants) and more about something far more mundane. One of the most central Minuteman myths that Shapira works to debunk is that it is a movement characterized by a clear set of right-wing beliefs (anti-immigration, racist, fanatical, nationalist). Instead, the work argues that to understand the Minutemen ideologically “is to understand them poorly.” Throughout the book Shapira's informants reveal to readers a number of contradictions and surprises. Though critical of immigration, the Minutemen are also critical of market logic, of the government, of globalization, and of the loss of community they see in contemporary American society. Although they often express anger towards Mexicans coming across the border, they also express

sympathy and respect for them. As Shapira puts it, “to the extent these folks have an ideology, it doesn’t fall along party lines.” Rather, the author suggests that at least some of the frustrations and problems Minutemen feel they are responding to are quite similar to those identified by liberal democrats.

This unsettling recognition then begs the question: if the Minutemen aren’t patrolling the borders as a result of their ideologies, what are they there for? The answer turns out to be belonging—or as Shapira puts it, “a chance to be the soldiers they used to be, the men they wanted to be.” The Minutemen, he argues, are engaged less with the kinds of national projects they are often described through, and more with “personal projects” of constructing notions of self, worth, place and meaning through practices of soldiering. Thus what it means to be a Minuteman has little to do with *actual* encounters with border-crossers (which are intentionally absent through most of the book). Instead, *being a Minuteman* happens through the acts of preparing for these encounters—the acts of waiting themselves, and the community Minutemen participate in while doing so.

On the whole, the work is a balanced, engaging, and rich account of what draws Minutemen (a group which does include some women) to the border, and how they make meaning out of their time there. Moreover, the work does what good ethnography often strives for but rarely achieves: it puts readers onto the border, embeds them in the daily lives of a community, and explores both seen and unseen with a keen sociological imagination.

Yet while the joy of the book is in its masterful storytelling and vivid description, it also makes a broader methodological contribution. In many ways the question at the heart of this book is less about the Minutemen and more about how we as social researchers understand social movements. Through its focus on exploring the world of the Minutemen through practice and actions (rather than ideology) Shapira’s work calls for a rethinking of what it means to understand social movements and the identities of those who participate in them.

Although the book will be of specific interest to those with an interest in migration, security, social movements, and masculinities, it invites a much broader readership. Its narrative style and uncomplicated prose make it accessible to a wider public. This, coupled with its accessible length and topical nature, makes it an ideal text for teaching at any level. Undergraduates and graduate students alike will find this a readable, refreshing, and insightful work.