

Roxanne Lynn Doty. *The Law into Their Own Hands: Immigration and the Politics of Exceptionalism*. Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 2009. 176 pp. Paperback: \$19.95. ISBN 978-0-8165-2770-0

Roxanne Lynn Doty's [*The Law into Their Own Hands: Immigration and the Politics of Exceptionalism*](#) describes how nativist, civilian vigilante groups have grown and gained political legitimacy in the United States. Although it was published in 2009, well before Donald Trump's chant "Build the Wall," hindsight *is* a gift—and the gift of hindsight is exactly what we get with Doty's careful examination: insight on how desires for national security, white supremacy, and ideologies of the Christian right coalesced to birth neo-vigilantism. Writing to an audience of academics, researchers and policymakers, Doty warns: "It would be easy to dismiss the whole phenomenon as farce and the groups as ridiculous, disgruntled fringe elements in a society experiencing complex and rapid transformations within the context of an increasingly interconnected world" (6). But if we are to be responsible citizens of a democracy, we must recognize that vigilante groups mirror the larger culture, yearning for control over changing conceptions of American identity and borders. Thus, Doty sets out on a dark and maddening trail into the Arizonian heartbeat of vigilante work in order to awaken readers to the consequences of this nation's formidable mix of nationalistic pride and individualistic protectionism.

Doty begins by tracing the historical precedents and roots of American vigilantism, both to show that today's vigilantism was not born overnight, but also to be able to distinguish neo-vigilantism in all its peculiarities. She proceeds by addressing how the vigilante movement fits into the larger anti-immigration movement, with overlapping concerns. Here, three themes shape her focus: national security, white supremacist/nativist groups, and the Christian right. Chapter 4 details a troublingly long list of news organizations and think tanks that have bestowed legitimacy on vigilante groups by giving them a platform with no counter-arguments or counter-narratives given in return. Chapter 5 discusses "attrition through enforcement"—all the ways in which this nation has made it unbearable for immigrants to live here, i.e. mass imprisonment, local ordinances, voter suppression, etc. A 2018 updated edition would undoubtedly be at least twice its size, as Doty would have to include Trump's infamously hostile Muslim ban and family separation policies. Though short in length, Doty's work brings together numerous concerns in fascinating, accessible detail.

The greatest strength of Doty's work is her location—the University of Arizona—and her willingness to spend time with the "Minuteman Civil Defense Corps" at their ranch headquarters in Three Points, Arizona. Doty is careful not to present a one-dimensional narrative of this group's constituents. They have downright confusing differences in motives: speaking of immigrants, one man confides "I have nothing against them. I think they're pretty courageous people ... They're hardworking people. And honorable" (21-22), whereas another man points to their perceived criminality and begs, "Why do we need a guest worker program? Do we have a guest murderer program?" (27). Like a fly on the wall, she observes their day-to-day office work, such as recruitment and orientations for new recruits. She comments on the ordinariness of it all ... how you might never suspect these people were self-proclaimed "border guards." She never pushes her readers into any easy conclusions about who these people are; rather, she steps back, observes, records, and allows her readers to immerse themselves in the movement, too.

Doty is especially helpful in trying to present an overall portrait of how anti-immigration forces in the U.S. are organized, and feed off of each other. Before reading this text, I had heard of groups such as FAIR and was familiar with the detestable actions of people like Arizona's former sheriff, Joe Arpaio, but I couldn't quite piece all the moving parts together. Though Doty concedes

that there's no singular overarching organization that ties it all together, she provides a family tree of sorts, with the closest thing to an umbrella organization being the Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR), and the closest thing to a research arm being the Center for Immigration Studies (CIS). However, she doesn't lend this family tree too much legitimacy. She unpacks how internal disagreements divide the body: while some folks are wholly focused on national security, others are concerned about population control, others fear the loss of their perceived sense of American identity ... the list could go on and on. Considering the gigantism of the topic she's covering, I appreciate Doty's ability to support her arguments with extensive examples and facts while remaining concise and accessible.

My favorite section of her book is undoubtedly her discussion on the role of the media. Doty doesn't pick sides: she shows how both liberal and conservative channels have given vigilante groups legitimacy by yielding them platforms with no contestation of their viewpoints. She isn't necessarily saying that the press shouldn't give vigilante groups any space or consideration at all, but she's holding them accountable to their responsibility to present alternative narratives to the public. For example, CNN's Lou Dobbs Tonight show featured Chris Simcox eighteen times and Jim Gilchrist twenty-two times between March 2005 and March 2007—an absurd amount of platform that has essentially buffeted them as heroic icons of the anti-immigrant movement. Using critical theorists Murray Edelman and Michele Foucault, Doty launches into an important examination of the “political spectacle,” or the concept that political “problems” often come into popular discourse not because they actually *exist* but because they reinforce certain ideologies yearning to be affirmed in the political realm (66). This message is so important that I almost wish she had taken it further, particularly with ideas and opinions from people of color, especially people who personally navigate this anti-immigrant culture.

Doty's work helps fill the dearth of resources regarding this topic. At the time of her writing, Congress was so desperate for information that it was using press reports to piece together information about vigilante groups (7). She truly harnessed the opportunity to crunch the numbers and present a fuller portrait of the grassroots vigilante movement all across the nation. While reading her work, I was reminded of the infamous Margaret Meade quote, “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.” Indeed, dispersed, non-elite, non-state, but *committed* citizens have come together to change the world, and thankfully, Doty does not shy away from declaring that it has been for the worse.

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