Critical Dialogue

American Insecurity and the Origins of Vulnerability. By
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Today, scholars and activists are grappling with the problem of insecurity, from Johannes Voelz's 2017 *The Poetics of Insecurity* to Astra Taylor's 2023 manifesto, *The Age of Insecurity.* The turn to insecurity is hardly surprising. In the decades since 9/11, America and its allies have mired themselves in destructive wars, wasting blood and treasure in a futile search for security. Castronovo's book is an exceptional addition to this growing literature. He effortlessly deconstructs the conceptual model ("securitization") prevalent in international relations and political studies by turning it inside out. Instead of rehearsing the story of the nation-state and its external enemies, he offers a cultural history of homeland vulnerability. With considerable erudition, *American Insecurity* documents the rise of *homo secures*, "the subject of security" who "experiences vulnerability over the fact that so many facets of life are deemed insecure and in need of securitization" (p. 230).

Castronovo brings this perspective to American history and literature — from the earliest insecurities of settler colonialism, which stripped the land from indigenous peoples and turned stolen people into property to create lasting historical fears and imagined anxieties. His archaeology of the subterranean layers of insecurity reminds us that American society was built on the manipulation of these fears by the military, government, and, ultimately, the capitalist market for profit, power, and control.

Part I of *American Insecurity* opens by immediately wrestling "security" away from the world of external defense policy, military affairs, and international relations and treats it instead as a multiform and contradictory cultural concept. The ground thus cleared, Castronovo quickly pins down this rascal concept with thirteen axioms, such as "1. Security Is a Matter of Aesthetics," and "2. Security Depends on Fear," etc. Thereafter, he

turns to U.S. cultural history, specifically the period from 1755 to 1837, and we see the axioms in practice. We learn, for example, that fear mattered greatly for Thomas Jefferson—fear of native "Indians," Blacks, and even a Black-Indian alliance, but also the future security of the population, as demographic change gathered like a storm on the horizon.

Part II, "Information, Aesthetics, Population," continues this cultural history by first discussing James Fenimore Cooper's 1826 novel, *The Last of the Mohicans.* In Castronovo's hands, Hawkeye becomes a mimetic figure, a colonist who mastered the wilderness but also a "native" security nightmare conjured by settlers who feared the forbidding tree line might erupt in murderous color. While settler violence was decimating the native population, its victims were still feared, propelling homesteaders to become Americans invested in "property, privacy, and propriety" (p. 82). He analyses this trio of investments in a close reading of Cooper's 1823 book, *The Pioneers.* "As a function of property," he tells us (p. 113), "privacy gives birth to the construct known as the liberal individual," and so a strange figure emerges into the light, *homo secures*, a person who possesses rights, such as the right to enjoy one's property in peace, as per common law.

One of the problems with the breadth of the security literature is that it is easy to overlook research that illustrates your argument—often this occurs when books are from another discipline, such as anthropology. For example, Asher Ghertner, Hudson McFann, and Daniel M. Goldstein's 2020 edited volume, *Futureproof: Security Aesthetics and the Management of Life*, reviews the evidence that security is a matter of aesthetics and questions the dominance of Security Studies in defining the contours of the debate. Our 2019 volume, *Spaces of Security: Ethnographies of Security Scapes, Surveillance and Control*, similarly demonstrates how the desire for security from insecurity drives much of the architecture and design of contemporary living, producing a physical, affective, and technological infrastructure of everyday life rather than being an objective contained within some subsection of the government or security-industrial complex. The ethnographies we offer in our 2024 book, *Trapped*, flesh this out further—even using the Vessel at Hudson Yards as our cover—to argue that recently constructed urban

neighborhoods, gated communities, and contemporary urban development bear the signature of security's aesthetic touch. The ethnographic work we carried out in that book helps us pinpoint who was protecting and securing, for what, and for whom.

When reading Castronovo's book, it becomes clear that Americans have long been subject to surveillance, which is sometimes resisted but often embraced. Chapter 4 discusses communication, information, and analysis via the writing of Charles Brockden Brown. Castronovo is interested in the avalanche of information produced by surveillance and the survivability of storytelling in the face of the "informational sublime" (p. 115). He gives us a fascinating reading of the gothic history of contemporary debates about information security and uncertainty. Castronovo describes the staggering amount of data collected by U.S. security agencies and the impossibility of knowing what it all means or can uncover (p. 125). He argues that excess creates apprehension and fear, requiring interventions that produce yet more uncertainty. However, there is a loss of precision at this point in the book. Fear, uncertainty, anxiety, and risk are written about as if they are the same thing—terms become unmoored from their contexts. Moreover, while the scale of data accumulation by surveillance systems may seem overwhelming and the patterns therein are hard to explain, the people who manage security agencies and critical infrastructure are perfectly capable of either ignoring internal problems or converting them into assets. After all, according to security experts, big data has "emergent" qualities available for pattern analysis, which is the basis of high-tech predictive policing systems. Defense and intelligence agencies have long understood "the problem of opacity" and "explainability" as technical challenges.

American Insecurity concludes with two chapters on race, security, and fear, a masterful exposition of his thirteen axioms, especially "12. Security Safeguards Whiteness." Settler colonists, he tells us, were obsessed with data analysis (p. 154), and Thomas Jefferson was an early enthusiast. He "trembled" (p. 155) when he realized U.S. population data showed an increasing Black population, a looming threat to white hegemony—*homo secures* is surely a white man. Just at the point when the reader's mind wanders back to today's demographic anxieties and "great replacement" theories, Castronovo introduces a vital discussion of Black intellectual life as expressed in *Freedom's Journal.* Many of the most striking themes in the book are here: the twinning of security and freedom, the population as a (racialized) target of security, and "the people" who accommodate security, resist it, or confound it. The closer *American Insecurity* draws to life, with all its contradictions, the better we see what insecurity means.

However, there is a further loss of precision in the Epilogue. Although it offers yet more masterful cultural history, the Epilogue to *American Insecurity* opens questions and invites challenges rather than offering conclusions. Castronovo leaves readers with the impression that contemporary security is a giant apparatus with "surveillance programs with unparalleled reach and incredible technological sophistication" (pp. 230-231). Our work with powerful security providers has left us less than impressed. In *Trapped*, we notice internal contradictions, deeply flawed technological outputs, and the machinery's reliance on public institutions and support. Later in the Epilogue, drawing on Herman Melville's story, "The Lightning Rod Man," Castronovo includes a brief entry on how security enters ordinary life as technology ("solutions") sold by people who are "part huckster and part evangelist" (p. 233), which becomes not a source of confidence but a risk to be managed, a felt vulnerability. This vital discussion, however, occurs in the last pages of Castronovo's book, making it a partial cultural history of American insecurity.

In *Trapped*, our focus is on security capitalism, on how the supply of and demand for security shapes life in gated communities, elite enclaves, airports, and other contemporary institutions. By foregrounding security capitalism and those who consent to control, who enjoy feeling "safe and secure," or who struggle to think and act differently, we notice how language and affects differ depending on context. Risk and the precautionary principle are technical devices in the realm of security experts, but chaos is the enemy beyond the gates. In gated communities, residents express their fears and anxieties, but they frame the life they have built on ground prepared by racial security capitalism using terms like "niceness." When representatives of the security-industrial complex speak of chaos, and when the residents of exclusive communities demand more yet more security to protect the niceness of their neighbourhood, they are code-switching, signalling support for the system as it is, but also opening a conversation that carries within it the possibility of change.

Response to Mark Maguire and Setha Low's Review of *American Insecurity and the Origins of Vulnerability*

— Russ Castronovo

Equipped with sophisticated technologies, backed by endless data, and seemingly justified by theories of the state, security presents a formidable edifice. Any critical assault on the conceptual architecture of securitization—to say nothing of its actual mechanisms—needs to be