

Covert Racist Discourses on the WWW: Rhetorical Strategies of the Minuteman Project

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The Minuteman Project and Representation of ‘Illegal Immigrants’

May 1st 2008 marked the controversial third anniversary of Immigration Day in the United States. The date was celebrated by some and scoffed at by others...for as long as newcomers have been immigrating to the U.S., majority groups of American citizens have tended to deride those nationalities most heavily immigrating at any given time. Today, of course, that means Spanish speakers—Latinos—and more specifically, Mexican citizens. Immigration debates reference diverse groups of people, from long-term employed but undocumented U.S. residents to various populations of border crossers, including migrants seeking work, drug or people smugglers, and terrorists. ‘Illegal immigrants’, the term most often used when referring to these dissimilar populations, actually conflates different groups of people and obscures issues related to border security and nationwide immigration policy reform. On the third anniversary of Immigration Day, national discourses primarily addressed undocumented migrants’ potential threat to national security and whether American laborers must compete for jobs with undocumented workers.

Arguments for increased border protection and stricter policies to address what is often referred to as the problem or *crisis* of illegal immigration draw on a wide variety of rhetorical strategies, including extensive use of metaphor. Many of the rhetorical strategies located in text, talk, and visual images rely on derogatory and prejudicial representations of undocumented migrants or residents. Santa Ana (1999, 2002) points out negative portrayals of Latin Americans in the *Los Angeles Times*, arguing that racist

metaphors in the mainstream press affect readers' views at an unconscious level. His work demonstrates that Americans are already accustomed to depictions of immigrants as national disasters or invaders or animals. Discriminatory representations of 'illegal immigrants' are rooted in cultural, political, and linguistic assumptions about national identity. Wide-ranging media coverage of pejorative majority group discourses serves to maintain and reproduce power differentials and inequalities across groups.

One anti-immigrant organization, The Minuteman Project (MMP), offers a lens through which to examine covert racist rhetoric aimed at border crossers and undocumented workers. MMP is a volunteer organization founded in October 2004 by two Americans disillusioned by the current administration's response to undocumented individuals crossing regularly over the Mexican border to enter the United States. The MMP quickly grew in numbers as the founders recruited others to join them in actively addressing what they term "the decades-long careless disregard of effective US immigration law enforcement" (MMP mission statement (M-S)). In April 2005, the fledgling group urged Americans to participate in its debut, at which volunteers camped along the U.S.-Mexican border in Tombstone, Arizona for one month to patrol for the "mobs of ILLEGAL aliens who endlessly stream across U.S. borders," (MMP M-S, cap. original) and ultimately to demonstrate the organization's presence, necessity, and efficacy as guardians of America's border(s).

O'Brien (2003) has shown that pejorative metaphors related to the arrival of immigrants in the rhetoric of the early 20th century include IMMIGRANT AS OBJECT, NATURAL CATASTROPHE, WAR, ANIMAL, and SUBHUMAN. As immigrants gradually increased a century ago, people began to fear that they would take over communities, and perhaps even the entire nation -- which is exactly what the MMP depicts through text and images a century later. For example, in the first lines of its M-S, the MMP introduces the purpose of its organization as "not a call to arms, but a call to voices seeking a peaceful and respectable resolve to the chaotic neglect by members of our local, state and federal governments charged with applying U.S. immigration law." Once establishing that a problem of "neglect" exists, the organization calls on Americans to volunteer for this 'mission'. According to the M-S, if nothing is done to address the problem of immigration, then "future generations will inherit a tangle of rancorous, unassimilated, squabbling cultures with no common bond to hold them together." These "unassimilated" and "squabbling cultures" -- undocumented migrant workers -- are depicted as chaotic and destructive. At the conclusion of the statement, the MMP portrays a frightening world wherein "historians will write about how a lax America let its unique and coveted form of government and society sink into a quagmire of mutual acrimony among the various sub-nations that will comprise the new self-destructing America".

In this depiction, the MMP is a lawful, fair and diplomatic organization, knowledgeable about current events concerning immigration policy, which lends it credibility and authority. Overall, this is a noble organization comprised of patriotic leaders concerned about the welfare and future of America, and solicits the participation of other leaders and fellow Americans with the same concerns. On the other hand, immigrants are represented as dangerous, threatening, predatory, barbaric, alien, numerous, unstoppable, vengeful, and generally unpleasant and disagreeable. The very

human reasons why most migrant workers cross the U.S.-Mexican border to come to the U.S. (e.g., to work at minimally paid and difficult jobs to feed their families) are erased. The MMP depicts this group as non-human and powerful: this ‘alien’ force holds malicious intentions and is capable of destruction and mayhem. In short, immigrants are monstrous killers of the harmonious nation and must be stopped. Thus, the MMP exploits cultural fears or attitudes about national threats and job security to frame undocumented immigrants as a menacing force that must be contained. In this way, the MMP accomplishes what van Dijk (1993a) terms “managing the minds of others” (p. 254) through dissemination of biased information. By tapping into American ideologies related to jobs and national security, the organization is better able to frame its own group as a positive, protective entity.

Derogatory metaphors and representations of ‘illegal immigrants’ such as those in the MMP M-S have consistently been sustained, circulated, recycled, and embellished to maintain the American public’s level of fear and perception of immigrants as invaders, animals, and subhuman. MMP discourse, therefore, must be situated in this larger historical framework. The MMP’s identity is inextricably bound to concepts of patriotism, which is not surprising since the organization uses the same name of early, pre-American Revolution volunteers who were ready to guard against the British ‘at a minute’s notice’ and was formed in the wake of the events of 9-11 and the burst of patriotic, and anti-immigrant, discourses that followed them. The MMP successfully entered the national immigration debate by procuring media attention covering its border patrols, rallies, and growing number of state chapters. Amidst federal government efforts to reform immigration policy, including implementing measures for increased security at the Mexican-American border, the MMP has grown in membership and revised, concretized, and re-revised its identity and agenda in response to proposed legislation. In addition, the MMP has formed alliances with members of the political establishment, and has consistently taken action to implement what it views as solutions to a growing border problem—a national crisis, it argues, that lawmakers are ill equipped to address.

Pivotal to this organization’s self-positioning within national immigration discourses, as well as its general growth, is its use of a website on the World Wide Web (WWW), as well as mass emails, for communication, solicitation, and identity formation. The WWW is an ever-changing, visual-spatial medium that houses images and texts in close proximity to one another to portray messages in multi-dimensional capacities. The MMP takes advantage of this medium in the framing discussed above of ‘illegal immigrants/aliens’ as invaders and its own group as protective entity. Furthermore, the organization distances itself from overtly racist, supremacist, or nationalist groups by pledging tolerance toward the very others it denigrates. By eschewing violent or racist acts, the MMP seeks to ensure its affiliation with the mainstream political establishment; however, upon closer analysis, the statements of tolerance primarily serve the function of positive self-representation for the MMP, not true encouragements of equality toward others. In this way, the MMP engages in covert racist discourses, also termed the new racism.

Covert Racist Discourses: The New Racism

The goal of this paper is to examine covert racist discourses of the MMP and to describe the mechanism by which racist discourses are enacted, as suggested by researchers in the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) tradition (Huckin, 2002, p. 163). Importantly, “critical discourse analysts want to know what structures, strategies or other properties of text, talk, verbal interaction or communicative events” assist in maintaining and reproducing racism (van Dijk, 1993b p. 250). Kress and van Leeuwen (2001) point out the importance for discourse analysis to consider the “semiotic resources of communication, the modes and the media used, and the communicative practices in which these resources are used” (p. 111). Thus, while some CDA researchers have traditionally drawn on newspaper articles or other print texts (e.g. transcripts of interviews or parliamentary hearings) as a site of analysis, we will be focusing on the MMP website, wherein the organization represents self and other through an interweaving of print and visual text.

Van Dijk (2000) suggests that the *new racism* “wants to be democratic and respectable, and hence first off denies that it is racism,” often by playing on the theme of difference. As such, covert racist discourse manifests in subtle forms, and racist discourse thus couched can be passed off as “‘mere’ talk” (p. 34). Furthermore, these subtle instances of racism might be more dangerous than the overt, public racial slurs largely tolerated in the past because those in power (*elites*) frame discriminatory discourses from vantages of apparently valid ideologies and attitudes. Studies in pejorative metaphors and representations of minority groups (‘Others’) seek to locate underlying ideologies of the speakers or writers, and their perspectives on other groups, as evidenced in discursive interactions of print text, images and the WWW. Santa Ana (1999, 2002) locates widespread use of racist immigrant and Latino metaphors in mainstream texts such as the *Los Angeles Times* and various California propositions. Van Dijk (2001) notes that hyperbole and metaphor are effective strategies to polarize ‘us’ (in-groups) and ‘them’ (out-groups) (pp. 103-108). The metaphors embedded in MMP texts are certainly not original. Researchers across a wide variety of disciplines have located common metaphoric themes in immigration discourses that point to discriminatory ideologies and underlying assumptions about ‘illegal immigrants.’ In fact, the MMP draws on previously existing metaphors and then takes them to another level to create complicated narratives with particular roles for particular players.

Minuteman Project Discourses

Despite strong discriminatory representations and exaggerated depictions of immigrants as dangerous individuals portrayed in such texts as its M-S and other online postings, the MMP is clearly concerned with appearing to embody a message of fairness and anti-discrimination practices of its organization through web postings encouraging tolerance toward others. This leads to interesting contradictions on the MMP website, such as statements expressing acceptance of and good will towards the very groups that it denigrates. In this way, the organization walks a careful line: it depicts a horrendous scenario of invading immigrants (and an incompetent and corrupt government), intermediated by purporting a stance of non-violence and peace. This is in line with van

Dijk's (1993b) observation that overall, social norms dissuade dominant/elite group members from appearing as racists or directly discriminating against minority groups. Importantly, he suggests that *denials* play a critical role in the identification of racist discourse. Racism denials are categorized as an "interaction strategy" (1993c, pp. 179-180):

When they want to say something negative about minorities, they will tend to use denials, disclaimers or other forms that are intended to avoid a negative impression with their listeners or their readers. [...] Such denials may not only be personal, but especially in elite discourse, they may also pertain to 'our' group in general: 'We' British (Dutch, French [Americans – MS & LW]) are not racist...' That is in talk about minorities, white people often speak as dominant group members. (p. 180)

At the same time, those engaged in covert racist discourse typically adopt a strategy in which they attempt to maintain positive self-presentation and face: in the case of the MMP, by presenting themselves as lawful, fair, patriotic, knowledgeable, protective of America, concerned with its welfare, and providing non-violent solutions to a problem that they see more clearly than elected officials and ordinary citizens – the problem of 'illegal immigrants'.

Through explicit web texts, the MMP denies that its activities are racist by separating itself from supremacist or nationalist group with texts such as the prominent header on its home page:

MMP has no affiliation with, nor will we accept any assistance by or interference from, separatists, racists, or supremacy groups or individuals, no matter what their race, color, or creed.

This header, similar to language used by the Equal Opportunity Employment Commission, serves the function of positive self-representation, differentiating the MMP from hate groups. Importantly, the reader is led to infer that the MMP does not view itself as a racist organization, despite the racist depictions of immigrants in its M-S. In fact, this statement seeks to warn overtly racist groups away from identifying with the organization and showing up at its border activities.

The scope of this paper does not allow for a thorough coverage of the many examples of covert racist discourses exemplified through disclaimers, coupled with positive self-presentation, on the MMP website. What we want to discuss here is one interesting example that at the same time illustrates a more complex visual-textual piece of the MMP website. The posting we will discuss is in reaction or response to large-scale student protests in southern California in late March, 2006. In these demonstrations, over 20,000 students walked out of classes to demonstrate against Congressional plans to imprison immigrants without legal documentation and to add more security to the border (Protests go on, 2006). The demonstrations were so large, in fact, that some compared the outpouring of protest to the civil rights movement in the 1960s, which makes this event an interesting one to consider (Swarns, 2006; Stolberg, 2006). In a country divided on

immigration related issues, the large-scale demonstrations where immigrants and their supporters waved home country flags in lieu of an American one inspired some and angered others. The student walkouts in Los Angeles were widely circulated in mainstream, conservative, and progressive print and web news in late March 2006, and were discussed widely on blogs in the following weeks leading up to the larger May 1 boycotts, all of which gained national attention. During the student protests at Montebello High, a photograph was taken of a Mexican flag raised above an upside down American flag. Later, high school administrators punished the student at the school who raised the flags in this way (Invasion USA, 2006). In April, Vietnam veterans in the southern California area called for the involved students to be expelled (Whittier vets angered, 2006).

The MMP recast the student walkouts at Montebello High not as protests, but as an “occupying army” that could potentially lead to riotous acts in states and districts as far away as Washington, D.C. Furthermore, the organization drew heavily on the controversial flag image to demonstrate visually an imminent invasion of “illegal aliens.” On the homepage of their website the organization posted a statement titled “There will be NO Mexican flag burning!!” However, this disclaimer is located between two images of the Mexican flag, one raised above an upside-down American flag and the other held by a protester in L.A., both of which are bound to raise negative emotions in the web audience:



[America On Notice: Occupying Army demands more from their captives!!](#)

Is the new rule of law, “The Biggest Thugs With The Biggest Clubs?”

In a show of strength the Army of Illegal Aliens and Open Border Traders set their example at Montebello High School California for the entire world to see! On March 25th 2006 the United Armies of Illegal Aliens marched on Los Angeles being welcomed with opened arms from Mayor...

[There will be NO Mexican flag burning!!](#)

The Minuteman Project does not endorse or encourage violence; this includes aggressive demonstrations that create malicious behavior such as flag burning, rioting, or any physical contact of any kind. In this time of social turmoil many anti-American groups wish to cause harm to the name of the Minutemen, because they know that the Minutemen stand for peace and the Rule of Law. The Minutemen are a model of strength and personal control in a time of civil disobedience. The Minuteman Pledge declares our virtues while our Standard Operating Procedures (S.O.P.) declare our actions..... [Read More](#)

["Occupying Army makes their demands!"](#)



We demand your rights! We demand your jobs!
We demand your future!

“If you don’t give us America then you are
racist pigs!”

In general, the juxtaposition of “There will be NO Mexican flag burning!!” with the vivid images of the Mexican flag above and below sends very mixed messages to the audience: the statement exhibiting tolerance for another nation’s flag is sandwiched between two negative images of that flag, which is used in other incidences to support the metaphor of invasion. The overall effect is that the tolerance asked for in the text is overridden by the images. In other words, while CDA analysts have typically found that text and image work in concert, here we find that they give two different messages – and the visual message is the more powerful one.

More specifically, publishing an image of the Mexican flag above an upside-down U.S. flag is an effort to arouse controversy and to disseminate this picture for those members who did not see it on the national news or the WWW at the time of the student protests. The organization employs this image as justification for the “social turmoil” in hopes to persuade other Americans to action. However, the web viewer has the flag and flamboyant title in view and then directly below lies a contradiction: despite naming immigrants an “an Occupying Army ...of Illegal Aliens”, the MMP points out that it stands for the “rule of law” and no action should be taken against the “invaders” through “aggressive demonstrations” that create “malicious acts” such as “flag burning” or “rioting” or “physical contact”. The MMP seem to be inferring here that the “Occupying Army” is the one carrying out “aggressive demonstrations” and thereby possibly causing or committing violence. But this statement also serves as a positive self-representation move for the Minuteman Project—whereas the “army of illegal aliens” desecrated the flag, as demonstrated in the photograph, its own group is calling for no violence toward other groups’ flags, even when they are carried by protesters. In addition, what seems initially to be a bold statement against flag burning or other violent acts in retribution for an incident that is unnamed in the text is, in fact, only a weak non-endorsement and non-encouragement of flag burning and violence (the MMP “does not endorse or encourage violence”) which is very different from and much weaker than condemning such acts. In other words, by naming what should NOT be done, and putting it in prominent position, the MMP could be implying that others might (and perhaps did) do it and the MMP would not (or does not) condemn such acts.

The visual image and accompanying text directly below the tolerance toward Mexican flags also give contradictory messages. The reader sees a “mob” of people, apparently supporting a young Latino male as he waves the Mexican flag in front of a crowd at Los Angeles City Hall. This image represents a threat, confirming the negative

portrayals of Other: ‘The invaders are coming. They are abusing our flag and flying their own. They come in mobs to destroy our country.’ The text included to the right of the image is the beginning of the posting (the reader must click to read it in its entirety). The inflammatory words are MMP words, but they are presented as if they came from the protesters: “we,” is used here as if it were the voice of the crowd of protesters, while “your” refers to Americans: “We demand your rights! We demand your jobs! We demand your future!” Clearly, these ‘invaders’ will take everything away if Americans don’t do something. Just as in the M-S, immigrants pose a threat to the foundations of America. Even more telling, it is the protesters who use the word “racist” (“If you don’t give us America then you are racist pigs!”) against Americans. Thus, by putting the word “racist” in the mouths of the immigrants, associating it with the insult “pigs”, and using “racist pigs” as a way to reference Americans – which would presumably draw the ire of the reader against them -- the MMP is trying to assure that immigrants, and not they, will be accused of racism.

But the positive self-representation by the MMP needs to be explored further, especially in the paragraph under “there will be NO Mexican flag burning”. Only the first sentence in the four-sentence statement actually refers to flag burning. All other sentences in the brief posting function to depict the Minutemen volunteers as victimized, peaceful and lawful, having strength and personal control, and clinging to virtues and a code for actions. It does so by framing MMP claims about all of these matters as facts. In the second sentence the claim is made that vague, unidentified “anti-American groups” want to “cause harm to the name of the Minutemen, because they know that the Minutemen stand for peace and the Rule of Law.” The noun phrase “anti-American groups” assumes that such groups exist; since it is the grammatical subject of “cause harm to the name of the Minutemen”, the whole clause suggests that anyone who is against the Minutemen is by definition “anti-American”. The word “because” joining the two clauses assists in framing the first clause as an indisputable fact – what is at issue is not that they exist or what they want to do; what is at issue is the cause, which is given by the second clause. Moreover, the verb “know” in the second clause is factive in nature: it presents what follows – “that the Minutemen stand for peace and the Rule of Law” -- also as indisputable. Furthermore, readers may have additional cause to believe that anti-American groups wish to cause harm: an alleged “time of social turmoil” is purported as a reason for why others might act out. The reference to a “time of turmoil” is cohesive with the problem of “neglect” cited in the M-S. Word choice and sentence structure present the immigration ‘crisis’ as fact, and not merely a perception or opinion. The third sentence carries this general theme forward: “The Minutemen are a model of strength and personal control in a time of civil disobedience,” once again juxtaposing positive depictions of the Minutemen (“model of strength”, “personal control” – cf. “stand for peace and the Rule of Law”) presented as facts (“The Minutemen are”) with a chaotic state of the nation (“civil disobedience” -- cf. “social turmoil”). The fourth sentence continues to present the MMP’s sense of itself in terms of how it “declares” its “virtues” through the Minutemen Pledge and its “actions” through its Standard Operating Procedures (S.O.P.), leaving no room for questioning of ideas, intentions, or code of conduct.

Conclusions

Although the MMP clearly constructs ‘illegal immigrants’ as dangerous, at the same time, the group also makes moves to downplay its vilification of this population by infusing a heavy ‘we’re just here to protect you’ rhetoric. And therein lies the tension in its rhetorical constructions of self and other. The MMP represents itself as patriots and pioneers, activists and lobbyists who are willing to go farther than the average American to protect the interests of the nation. The social reality created by the MMP is one of impending deterioration if not destruction of the nation unless Americans act *now* to stop immigrants from entering the country – and the best way to do that is to join the MMP.

The construction of undocumented immigrants in the M-S sets up a background for the unfolding saga of ‘invading aliens’ which is made more realistic and concrete through subsequent response texts to real events such as the student protests. The visuals of the Mexican flags are quite powerful, considering the widespread criticism of this act in the press just after the protests. The MMP juxtaposes print text and images to reframe immigration-related events and make unfounded accusations and absurd hypothetical future predictions. The MMP’s disassociation from violent actions as well as its demonstration of control in a time of social turmoil assists in masking its clearly stated racist views on undocumented immigrants displayed in the M-S and the “Americans on Notice” posting located above the “No Mexican Flag Burning” statement.

Furthermore, the organization draws on its group identity to purport itself as peaceful citizens and upholders of the law, referring web readers to the official group pledge and S.O.P as proof. In this way, they do as van Dijk (1993b) predicted: racism denials come in many forms, but generally a denial “presupposes a real or potential accusation, reproach or suspicion of others about one’s present or past actions or attitudes, and asserts that such attacks against one’s moral integrity are not warranted” (p. 180). The MMP has since broken into two organizations: The Minuteman Project, headed by James Gilchrist and The Minuteman Civil Defense Corps (MCDC) led by Chris Simcox. Each group has its own website with differing rhetorical styles and goals; however, much of the original website’s style of denigrating portrayals of undocumented immigrants and positive self representation remains constant across each organization’s new website. The destabilized identity of the MMP that emerged in postings and images on the WWW allowed the original group to appeal to a wide variety of audiences, from members of the political establishment to members of white nationalist groups. As the groups have split according to political differences and diverging agendas, the separate websites reflect the newly emerging identities of the different Minutemen; namely, the newer Minuteman Project site appears more conservative as it looks toward aligning itself more closely with the political establishment. However, that does not mean that ideologies have changed as much as have the presentation of the organization’s views for political purposes. As scholars and activists, we need to explore various mechanisms through which counter discourses can endeavor to reach wider audiences in local communities and thereby counteract the damage that racist discourses continue to inflict on minority groups.

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