

waged across several disciplinary fronts. This contention is fundamental to *American Insecurity and the Origins of Vulnerability*, which argues for the centrality of humanities fields, especially literary criticism, cultural history, and political theory, for understanding the affective force of anxiety and fear in diminishing democratic life. As part of this interdisciplinary effort, I am pleased to have as interlocutors Setha Low and Mark Maguire, whose work in anthropology provides an ethnographic dimension to this endeavor. I am equally pleased that their assessment of *American Insecurity* highlights the distinctiveness of its contributions to the critique of security. (Confidentially, if crossing disciplinary borders can occasion a bit of trepidation, I am relieved to find out that my book passes muster with practitioners of the social sciences.)

Given the differences in terms of evidence and approach, it is not surprising that the emphases of a literary scholar and two anthropologists might not always align. A subtle instance of this variance might be witnessed in Low and Maguire's observation that *American Insecurity* "brings" its insights and "perspective to American history and literature." There is, of course, nothing wrong with this statement, but I might have inverted it. That is, I would describe the aim of the book as employing American literature, especially the archives of print culture, as a critical tool for interrogating both the everyday practices and the philosophical givens of security discourse. What seems a quibble is really about methodology. Literature is not simply a body of texts that needs to be explained; instead, literature, broadly construed to include everything from novels to Jefferson's notes to his plantation overseer to articles in the first Black newspaper in the United States, is also that which explains and denaturalizes otherwise ossified formations of state and culture.

This difference in emphasis, I think, accounts for Low and Maguire's dissatisfaction with the way that the book concludes. While citing the "masterful cultural history" in the book's final section, they also see a "loss of precision" in the "Epilogue to *American Insecurity* [which] opens questions and challenges rather than offering conclusions." Exactly so! Instead of consolidating action items, one goal of humanities critique is to extend interrogation and, above all, to remain skeptical of its own conclusions. The Epilogue to *American Insecurity* exists as a provocation to continue the work of critique, which the structures of security sorely need. It may be hardly curious, then, that their review here of *American Insecurity* concludes by circling back to the topics discussed in their book, *Trapped*, just as earlier they state that researchers and scholars often find it "easy to overlook research that illustrates your argument," especially when that research is "from another discipline such as anthropology." This disciplinary signpost, like the varying stress on openness

versus conclusions, reminds us that academic discipline is not wholly unrelated to the policing of borders.

**Trapped: Life under Security Capitalism and How to Escape It.** By Mark Maguire and Setha Low. Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2024. 182 pages. \$14.00 paper.  
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— Russ Castronovo , University of Wisconsin-Madison  
rcastronovo@wisc.edu

In the state of "Warre, where every man is Enemy to every man," as Thomas Hobbes warned in his 1651 text, *Leviathan*, society lacks the security necessary for business and commerce. "There is no place for Industry ... nor use of the commodities that may be imported," he continued. But it is not simply that business interests require security; it is also that now, four centuries later, security has become big business. In *Trapped*, anthropologists Mark Maguire and Setha Low (also a professor of environmental psychology) describe this conjunction as "security capitalism," a seemingly inescapable assemblage that both privatizes and militarizes public space. In the process, it increases the profits of real estate developers and security contractors, even as it ultimately impoverishes democracy around the globe.

Part of the Stanford University Press Briefs series, *Trapped* is a trim and accessible volume that pairs ethnographic storytelling with trenchant critique while still leaving space in the book's conclusion to outline steps for defunding security. Its style is essential to the political work that the authors see this book doing in tearing down the walls, both literal and conceptual, that have created a gated worldview built on fear, distrust, and segregation. Their description of security technology as "the latest snake-oil-based solution" (p. 98), their warning that the security-industrial complex creates profiles of presumed threats and that "tomorrow, it could be you!" (p. 111), and their goal to "free people from security" (p. 41) all characterize the direct and often punchy statements that drive their argument and add to its urgency. In opposition to the convoluted coordination of private, neoliberal, and state interests that enable security capitalism to thrive, *Trapped* offers a crisp breakdown of the hypervigilance, constant policing, and other ailments that beset everyday life within the contemporary conjuncture. (Given this streamlined approach, this book does not feature sustained engagements with theorists who discuss the biopolitical or algorithmic aspects of security, but that is no cause for disappointment. Indeed, *Trapped* is a book that would pair well on a syllabus with Hobbes's *Leviathan* or Michel Foucault's *Security, Territory, Population*.)

Two stories set Maguire and Low's intervention in motion. The prologue opens on an affluent couple in Nairobi, Kenya, on their way to do some shopping for a

dinner party. A few hours later, husband and wife find themselves hiding beneath cars in a parking garage during a terrorist attack on the Westgate Mall in 2013 that killed scores of people. Next, the introduction begins by setting the stage for an incident that occurred in the United States the previous year: “In early 2012, a teenage boy travelled with his father to Sanford, Florida” (p. 1). What unfolds is the now tragic and infamous killing of Trayvon Martin by a neighborhood-watch volunteer patrolling a community already surveilled by security cameras. These beginnings gesture to the global reach of *Trapped* whose case studies move from Nairobi to Sanford and from Glasgow to San Antonio, Texas. Moreover, these beginnings pointedly reveal how the security that is designed to keep us safe heightens racial segregation, promotes fear of working people and immigrants, and imprisons suburbanites behind walls—often with lethal effects.

The ethnographies that Maguire and Low present offer portraits of homeowners concerned about break-ins as well as of security consultants who have become doubtful of the security regimes that they have so fully participated in and supported. Via transcripts of recorded interviews, readers first meet suburbanites who moved to gated communities and have now grown afraid of life outside their neighborhood walls. Even more worrisome, the fact that such enclaves are serviced by landscaping, cleaning, and construction crews forces residents to “admit that with the workers going in and out of the community that maybe it was not very secure after all” (p. 24). Considering the guard booths, access codes, and reinforced metal gates, not to mention neighbors keeping track of people who look like they do not belong inside the walls, one is tempted to wonder how two anthropologists ever gained permission to enter such communities in the first place to interview residents. Maguire and Low’s takeaway is stark: such communities are hardly communities at all. The isolation that many residents behind neighborhood walls feel is symptomatic of a larger political condition in which people are isolated “from the perceived ills and risks of democratic society” (p. 35).

Moving from suburbia to the megapolis, the authors next turn to the financial incentives, architectural feel, and day-to-day management associated with the Hudson Yards development in New York City. This second chapter examines an often-overlooked dimension of security—namely, that in addition to keeping people safe (and, surely, some safer than others), the coordination of urban design, policing, and surveillance is designed to reaffirm notions of class exclusivity and status. “Yeah, I feel a little out of place” (p. 63), responds one visitor interviewed at Hudson Yards. To be sure, though, this reaction is the intended effect of privately owned public spaces (POPS)—paradoxical phrasing that reveals much about neoliberalism—such as Hudson Yards. Although Maguire and Low do not explicitly invoke theories of affect or aesthetics

in this particular case study, the reliance of security capitalism on sensation and embodied responses is clear. Feeling “out of place” might itself be construed as a security mechanism that maximizes an affective infrastructure that exists alongside the contrivances of “urban militarism” (p. 56).

Admittedly, the view from inside the airports, shopping malls, housing developments, and other fortresses of security capitalism is bleak. Public space is privatized, safety is commodified, and sociality is represented as a threat. In the book’s final three chapters, Maguire and Low resist giving in to this grim assessment by speaking with security professionals who have started to question the securitization of everyday life and have begun asking about alternative approaches. In Northern Ireland, they talk with Liam, a member of a local constabulary, about community policing. Maguire and Low do not underestimate the hurdle of instituting such a change, noting that in the United States, for instance, “private guards outnumber police by a ratio of 3:1” (p. 82). Their next interviewee, Steve, an airport police inspector in the UK, describes his growing disillusionment with the high-tech and technocratic solutions that private security firms peddle to national and local governments. They view Steve’s dissent as “a welcome heresy in the faith-based world of militarized airport security” (p. 96). The frame widens with the perspective of Sarah, head of a consultancy advising the European Union about security matters. Like Steve, she begins to doubt the technocratic fixes to ensure public safety, and she goes one step further by registering how, for the promoters of security capitalism, the real objective is not public safety but rather growing the security-industrial sector of the global economy. In the end, though, Sarah’s view comes to align with Liam’s in Northern Ireland, as she wonders if, as Maguire and Low put it, “perhaps there are cases where it would be better to invest in accountable community safety rather than dehumanizing surveillance” (p. 118).

It would be easy to blame security capitalism’s stranglehold on public life upon individual actors, like Jenna, who, back in chapter one, expressed suspicion about the “laboring people or the maids” (p. 25) working in her walled subdivision. Maguire and Low have other targets in mind, principally the combination of neoliberal and technocratic solutions that often amount to mere half measures. The discourse of such “solutionism” seeks technical fixes for complex social problems, they argue. Security experts no doubt find it easier to think about drones and cameras than the barriers to equality. Solutionism results in “the evacuation of complexity to sociality” (p. 101), leaving us with a highly technical but ultimately limited toolkit for rethinking and changing the security-scape that has replaced the social landscape. Maguire and Low point out a final irony in that even though solutionism routinely

proves ineffective, it is nonetheless quite efficient in generating profits.

Security, like capitalism, is no doubt lucrative for a small few, while abandoning the rest to more intensive biopolitical control, increased exposure and risk, and greater precarity. Such inequalities make it crucial but also exceedingly difficult to “defund security,” per their concluding imperative, perhaps as difficult as abolishing capitalism itself. The twining together of security and capitalism suggests the scope of the challenge that Maguire and Low meet by urging five strategies: opening the gates; taking back the city; reimagining policing; countering counterterrorism; and reclaiming the homeland. Easier said than done—but that does not make the saying any less valuable.

### Response to Russ Castronovo’s Review of *Trapped: Life under Security Capitalism and How to Escape It*

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— Mark Maguire  
— Setha Low 

As we reviewed each other’s books about security, student protests erupted on campuses from the Sorbonne to Sydney. Although the protestors’ message often vanished in the fog of the culture wars, one demand rang out: Universities should divest from security-capitalist enterprises that send weapons and surveillance systems to warzones. Back in 1961, U.S. President Dwight D. Eisenhower warned of the unwarranted influence of national security interests on public life, especially on “the free university.” Today, well over half a century later, university managers invest in arms companies, salivate over defense contracts, and compete to host homeland security “fusion centers.” The free university too has been captured by security capitalism.

Russ Castronovo’s *American Insecurity* and our book, *Trapped*, are complementary projects that expose the conceptual toxicity of security and its corrosive presence in public life, including in universities. Read together, we argue, our books challenge overly narrow or sympathetic conceptualizations of security and show us its historical roots and contemporary forms. *American Insecurity* provides readers with rich historical examples. Whether we are

reading about Thomas Jefferson’s fears about Black and Indigenous population growth or raging settler violence, Castronovo teaches us that securitization flowers where people fear one another. And he shows how these fears are fertilized by new ways of gathering and representing information which, along with security’s aesthetic elements, seeds further division and anxiety. In *American Insecurity*, security appears as a perpetual work-in-progress, and its subject, *homo securus*, always has some new vulnerability in need of attention. “Security may be a precondition of freedom,” Castronovo reminds us, “but it is also the case that political freedom cannot exist without insecurity” (p. 39).

Of course, as anthropologists, we approach security from a different direction. Like Castronovo, we are alarmed by governmental appeals to security and the childlike handling of this unstable and potentially toxic concept. However, we also treat concepts as ethnographic subjects, and we have noticed that a gap exists between security as formulated and security as experienced—to paraphrase Seneca, the state’s security does not imply safety for its citizens. In our work on gated community residents, police, and security consultants, we noticed two remarkable things. First, in many areas of life, such as those just mentioned, where one would expect *homo securus* to be at least partially settled, we find intense discomfort with the current socio-political configuration. Second, rather than being subject to securitization, the residents, officials, and entrepreneurs who participated in our research were vital to its operation. Germany’s chancellor recently announced, “*Ohne Sicherheit ist alles nichts.*” (Without security, there is nothing). However, the reverse is true also: without public resources and consent, votes, and sympathetic intellectual voices, security is nothing.

In 1961, Eisenhower called on an “alert and knowledgeable citizenry” to fight against the unwarranted influence of the military-industrial complex. Today, students are fighting to free the university from the pernicious influence of security capitalism, but “security” is also the ground where struggles are taking place over racial discrimination, unequal access to residences and cities, policing, and anti-terrorism. Our book, *Trapped*, addresses those who have achieved security, only to realize they are neither safe nor free.