

Concrete Connections? Articulation, Homology, and the Politics of Boundary Walls

Abstract: Scholarly and activist discourses alike have invoked a homology between walling practices along the US/Mexico border and in occupied Palestine. Such discourses often rely upon visual/rhetorical maneuvers to assert equivalence between distinct sites, technologies and practices. Often, this equivalence then enables the collapsing of difference into what we describe as the “global security” paradigm, one that represents a multiplicity of governmental practices, logics and outcomes as manifestations of a singular “global” phenomenon. Although we celebrate the impulse to articulate common struggles against violence or dispossession, we question whether the assertion of singularity or equivalence between sites obscures important differences that might more productively inform a politics of solidarity. We furthermore ask whether viewing “securitization” as a ubiquitous global phenomenon risks reiterating the very logic by which states rhetorically justify their walling practices. In this paper we explore these issues, and identify a need for further work that takes seriously the heterogeneity of walling projects while examining the translocal practices and articulations that inform their proliferation and construction.

Keywords: Borders, walls, security, solidarity, articulation

Introduction

It has become commonplace to refer to our contemporary moment of late-modern capitalism as characterized by a contradiction between increasing interconnectedness brought about through the rapid flow of goods, capital, and information, on the one hand; and an increasing fragmentation brought about by border walls, securitization and other barriers to mobility, on the other (Sassen, 1999, Gilbert, 2007; Brown 2010; Nevins, 2010; Vallet and David, 2012; Dear 2013). Academics and activists alike have attempted to understand and militate against the proliferation of walls and the transnational security-industrial complex invested in their construction (Borderlands Autonomist Collective, 2012; Jones, 2012; Loyd et. al., 2012; Schivone, 2012; Stanley, 2013; Mena, 2014). Two barriers in particular are often presented as emblematic of this “global security” paradigm: the US/Mexico border wall and Israel’s separation barrier (see for example Nevins, 2006; Brown, 2010; Lloyd and Pulido, 2010; Jeffrey et al., 2011; Jones, 2012).

In this paper, we wish to pause for a moment to examine the homologizing of discrete walling projects. Although we celebrate the impulse to articulate a common struggle against the violent and dehumanizing effects of boundary walls and related security practices, we are uneasy about the analytical basis by which certain affinities are often asserted. We wonder what sorts of politics are enabled or disabled by narratives that construct securitization as a ubiquitous global phenomenon? We also fear that arguments for either equivalence or singularity fail to appreciate the contingent and site-specific dimensions of walling projects, as well as the trans-local networks and affinities that inform their construction. Between a homogenizing global security/global struggle imaginary, and the equally alienating effects of radical specificity, we instead posit a site-ontology approach that deconstructs this false binary and sees walling practices as emergent through projects of

articulation between walling agents and interests, on the one hand, and the heterogeneous actors who are targetted by or resist these walling practices, on the other.

In what follows we consider both scholarly and activist accounts of walling practices in Palestine and along the US/Mexico border. From our own activist and scholarly work we draw out our understanding of some of the important differences in the processes of colonization, dispossession and resistance that inform security and walling practices in each site. Our concern here is both political and analytical. Viewing border “securitization” as a “global” phenomenon, we argue, risks reiterating the very terms upon which security discourse is frequently articulated. To challenge concrete oppressive practices necessitates a robust understanding of how a site is put together, including the mechanics of security practices and their disparate affects. An assertion of *a priori* equivalence may often be a barrier to such robust analysis and understanding, and therefore to the strategic formulation of political action and affinity. At stake is a refusal to allow difference – different peoples, places, histories, experiences and struggles – to be reduced to the generic Other of state security discourse. For this reason we call for analysis and activism premised on the recognition of difference – because it is through this recognition that different struggles can meaningfully inform and inspire one another.

Walling practices, site ontology and the politics of articulation

A great deal of scholarship has attended to the analytic purchase and strategic importance of trans-local articulation, as disparate territorialized movements, networks and organizations stake out common ground and strategies for emancipatory struggle (Routledge et al., 2007; Sundberg, 2007; Escobar, 2008). Yet as Cumbers et al. (2008) note, there remains “a need for greater critical and conceptual clarity” about the actors, practices,

relationships and spatial concepts that assert or construct these network connections. If this is true for the study of activist solidarities, the same observation may apply to those actors and practices involved or invested in the proliferation of walling itself. As examined below, assertions of equivalence between bordering sites and security practices frequently take the existence of walls as a starting point and work backwards from there. Instead of assuming commonality, we might approach security barriers as particular social/material arrangements produced within and made intelligible by “networks of practice” which link together heterogeneous sites through the exchange of knowledge, technologies and articulations of affinity (both by state actors and those who oppose them - cf Schatzki 2003, 195). This approach is useful because it recognizes the *in situ* materiality and material effects of boundary walls, while also taking into account the diverse array of sites, actors, and practices beyond the physical border that contribute to their construction.

To insist on a site-ontology approach that prioritizes the materiality and contingency of the site does not blindly celebrate particularism. Rather, it focuses attention on *how* a site comes into being, opening it up to critical analysis and allowing us to re-inscribe those “maps of grievance” that motivate activism (Featherstone 2003, 2008). Rather than a homogenized Other struggling against a hegemonic monolith, this method would approach US and Israeli boundary walls as weakly constructed and contingent site assemblages, horizontally connected through the situated discursive practices and technological innovations of trans-national policy-makers and security experts – as well as the interventions and behavior of activists, organizers, and other non-state actors. These actors may articulate solidarities which inform and inspire the construction of particular political identities, but such identities are never reducible to one preformed political subjectivity.

In light of the above, we argue that our analytic and political task is to disaggregate

the many confederations which produce and seek to unify specific bordering practices, while at the same time resisting the dehumanizing violence these enact – a process of undoing and re-writing the world, *re-geographing*. Approaching walling as a set of material practices that unfold within, produce, and connect heterogeneous sites opens these up for critical investigation and tactical intervention. But before expanding on this point it is worth examining commonplace scholarly and activist treatments of boundary walls, including the homological short-cuts frequently used to interpret their causes and effects.

Reproducing state security discourse

The last few decades have witnessed an unprecedented build-up of fortification along international borders and even in divided urban areas within national boundaries. The United States border wall and the Israeli separation barrier are often presented as exemplary of this trend. Scholars have offered various explanations as to why these “new” walls, which stand in stark contrast to the 21st century promise of a borderless world, are being built. For example, Brown argues that contemporary walling practices should be conceived of as a “*single* historical phenomenon, despite their formally disparate purposes and effects” (italics added Brown, 2010; p. 26). For Brown, the walls represent a theatrical performance of nation-state sovereignty in the face of its “waning” viability, as signalled by the inability of states to control myriad threats that transcend their geopolitical borders (such as transnational migration, neoliberalism, and the spread of “God-sanctioned political violence” – cf Brown 2010, p. 23).

In sympathetic contrast with Brown’s view, Till (2013) contends that the phenomenon of border walling does not indicate a loss of state sovereignty, but rather its resurgence. Borrowing from Butler’s (2006) concept of “resurgent sovereignty,” and by extension Agamben’s (1998) notion of the state of exception, Till argues that walls represent

a suspension of juridical power, the rolling back of democratic legislative sovereignty, and the assertion of a unified executive state in the name of security. Gregory (2011), too, is invested in viewing boundary securitization as a singular project, part of a “militarization of the planet” (238), or what he calls “the everywhere war.” Despite Gregory’s caution “that the everywhere war is also always *somewhere*” (239-240), his analysis remains situated within the abstract space of US military doctrine, where cyberspace, the “AfPak” border region, and the U.S./Mexico borderlands are flattened into a global “battle-space.” Jones (2012) offers a more nuanced treatment of security practices along the US/Mexico, Israel/Palestine and India/Bangladesh divides, identifying features that unite state discourse, ideology and practice in all three locations. In particular, Jones highlights the ways that state actors work to reduce diverse practices to a singular interpretive frame, notably with reference to the so-called “War on Terror.” Discourses of “security” and “terror” construct heterogeneous challenges to nation-state interests as interchangeable – whether these be Palestinian farmers, Mexican migrants, transnational criminal organizations or jihadi terrorists. By extension, various government practices, infrastructures and technologies are justified under a singular “security” paradigm and therefore positioned as a sovereign imperative, beyond political consideration.

In the United States, for example, the George W. Bush administration first announced its “strong support” for the border wall provisions of the 2006 REAL ID Act (a law that led to the construction of some 600 miles of fencing, vehicle barriers, roads and other infrastructure and authorized the Secretary of Homeland Security to waive some 37 separate federal laws to facilitate this construction - cf Sundberg, 2013) by declaring that the border wall was needed in order “to protect against terrorist entry” (Bush, 2005). The Israeli state has similarly declared that its wall “is intended strictly for security needs and has no

political significance” (Sharon, 2002) despite its undeniable transformation of facts on the ground.

By framing its actions as a security imperative, the Israeli state is able to accomplish an additional maneuver, asserting that its actions are equivalent to the security initiatives undertaken by other “democratic” states. As a result, any criticism of Israeli practices represents an unfair and illegitimate singling out of the Israeli state (a charge redolent with anti-Semitism). Hence Israeli PM Ariel Sharon’s rejection of the International Court of Justice’s 2004 ruling against the separation wall:

This is a biased opinion... supported solely by political considerations... [It] completely ignores the reason behind the construction of the Security Fence – which is murderous Palestinian terror. It is only concerned with the Israeli response – the erection of the Fence, which is the most reasonable measure in the face of this wicked terror (Sharon, 2004).

By accepting the unifying security frame at face value, we risk flattering Israeli and US narratives thus ceding significant political ground, before the process of contestation has even begun. More helpful would be an approach that disarticulates the black-box of “security”, and rearticulates the diverse expressions of human dignity and struggle that such discourses obscure. Unfortunately, many activist narratives proceed by doing exactly the opposite.

Activist narratives

Like many of the scholarly arguments discussed above, the rhetorical assertion of homology between the Israeli separation barrier and the U.S./Mexico border features prominently in Palestinian-solidarity and anti-border activist discourses in the United States. For example, in 2009 and 2010 the University of Arizona chapters of Jewish Voice for Peace (JVP), Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP), and the grassroots migrant solidarity

organization No More Deaths constructed a mock border wall midway across the university's campus, complete with checkpoints where students were asked to show their "papers" [see figure 1]. The mock wall was claimed to represent both the Israeli separation wall and the U.S./Mexico border. The pro-Israel Anti-Defamation League (ADL) highlighted the event in its 2011-2012 review of "Anti-Israel Activity on Campus," expressing concern that SJP is "promoting the notion that the U.S.-Mexico border fence is analogous to the security fence Israel has built along the West Bank and that immigrants in the U.S. and Palestinians are similarly discriminated against" (Anti-Defamation League 2012). Their concern is part of a broader fear that the Palestinian justice movement is diversifying, and articulating strategic alliances with Latino activist organizations like MEChA, which endorsed the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement in 2012.

Articulating equivalence between the US/Mexico border wall and the Israeli separation barrier attempts to simultaneously challenge the legitimacy of the US/Mexico border and problematize the narrow ethnic-conflict category into which Palestine is often pigeonholed. But the collapsing of the Israeli barrier into a general phenomenon of "border walls" is itself problematic, insofar as this wall is not constructed along any internationally recognized border. Our primary concern, however, is that presenting these two walls as equivalent obscures *how* these walls work, and, by extension, opportunities to strategically intervene and combat their operation.

The poster, "What's the Difference: No Walls, However Tall" exemplifies this problem (Figure 2). The black border frames and provides the background for the white bold letters, which pose a rhetorical question: "What's the Difference?" The poster immediately answers its own question—there is no difference, everything is the same. Palestine and Mexico are reduced to indistinguishable, dusty desert landscapes, the static

terrain upon which Israel-US sovereignty acts. The wall is seamless. It was not welded together, it is not held in place by hot molted material, nor is it latched, pinned or fastened in order to make the connection. Rather it is one border bending outward away from the viewer extending to two different vanishing points, collapsing together everything that lies outside. This rendering is the mirror image of the geographic imaginary of state security narratives, the “everywhere war” that Gregory (2011) describes. There is, of course, potential to appropriate this security discourse in articulating broad-based movements of diverse parties unified by their risky externality. But instead, the focus on “the wall” reinforces the very impression of global sovereignty that the US seeks to project, while obscuring the diversity of histories and voices that might be encountered on the “other side.”

The heterogeneity of security practice

The casualness with which walls are invoked to aesthetically homologize the U.S./Mexico border and occupied Palestine conceals more than it reveals about the everyday geographies of security practice in these sites. Take for example the challenges that face Palestinian students, on the one hand, or undocumented U.S. university students, on the other. For Palestinians who live in neighborhoods and villages around East Jerusalem, attending classes at al-Quds University in Abu Dis involves navigating a circuitous route around walls and through check-points. The Israeli separation barrier thus serves to obstruct and transform the rhythms of everyday life through the imposition of arbitrary impediments to mobility. In the United States, meanwhile, it is not the physical imposition of walls that regulate everyday movement for undocumented students; rather, mundane governmental spaces, technologies and events – from applying for financial aid to getting pulled over in traffic – generate heightened fear and uncertainty (see for example De Genova 2002, Hiemstra 2010; Coleman and Kocher, 2011; Williams and Boyce, 2013). Walls and

checkpoints in Palestine demand that every Palestinian man, woman, and child is presented for inspection, whereas immigration policing in the US demands the opposite – that immigrants conceal themselves; that they hide in fear. These bordering techniques represent two distinct modes of power, with divergent goals and effects.

The origins of the Israeli and U.S./Mexico border walls are likewise irreducible, despite the respective states' contemporary arguments to the contrary. While the territorial boundaries of the United States have been cemented with international legitimacy for over a century, Israel remains in a state of belligerence and refuses a fixed border. Though the Jewish state enjoys regional military supremacy and international diplomatic legitimacy, it remains a “garrison state,” having failed to “solve” its “native problem,” thus relying on US military aid to remain in a constant state of war (Usher 2006, 11). This notion of a walled garrison is not new to the Israeli geographic imaginary but is deeply embedded in Zionist political thought. In *Der Judenstaat*, Theodor Herzl promised that a Jewish state in Palestine would form a protective wall for Europe, “an outpost of civilization as opposed to barbarism” (Herzl 1988 [1896], 96). Similarly, Vladimir Jabotinsky, the father of Zionist revisionism called for “Zionist colonization” to proceed “behind an iron wall, which the native population cannot breach” (Jabotinsky 1923). These powerful political metaphors were initially manifest on the physical landscape of Palestine in the form of settlement outposts surrounded by walls, fences, and watchtowers (Segal and Weizman 2003).

In addition, rather than waning sovereignty brought about, in part, through transnational labor migration, as Brown (2010) and Pusterla and Piccin (2012) assert, it was ex-Soviet and East Asian labor migration to Israel in the early 1990s that *enhanced* Israel's economic independence and by extension its national sovereignty (Usher 2006, 17). This allowed Israel to pursue a unilateral policy of strategic withdrawal and barrier construction, in

a return to labor Zionism's vision of self-reliant separation from the Palestinians. Meanwhile, everything from stabbings to car thefts to "God sanctioned" suicide bombings have all served as timely justifications for the unilateral land-grab, which Israel has pursued while ignoring challenges from the United Nations and the International Court of Justice. Beyond capturing land, the physical spectacle of the wall gives peace of mind to Israeli citizens – assuaging the sense of insecurity caused by ill-defined boundaries, and allowing for a collective psychological disengagement from the Occupied Territories without actually ending the occupation (Jones 2009, Falke 2012). Indeed, far from representing a separation from Palestinians, the wall serves the twin function of aesthetic separation and panoptic surveillance (Etkes 2007, Alatout 2009, Falk 2012), deeply embedding Israeli military power within the terrain of Palestinian everyday life.

Like the West Bank barrier, the US/Mexico border wall is the product of competing political interests unfolding over time. A detailed genealogy of the wall's construction can be found elsewhere (see Dunn, 2010; Nevins, 2010; Maril, 2011). We wish here to emphasize two points: first, framing the wall's construction *only* as part of a post-9/11 process of securitization overlooks its origins in early-1990s nativist anxieties about transnational migration, a phenomenon which itself was a result of the massive socio-economic disruptions caused by currency liberalization in Mexico and the passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement (see Nevins, 2010). Second, focusing on the border wall alone risks overstating its importance to a more general governmental approach to so-called border security and immigration enforcement. While critics and sympathizers alike have described the proliferation of security and immigration enforcement activities in the US "interior" as reflecting a border that is now "mobile," such language serves to naturalize the border itself as a territorial norm that is then merely relocated or extended. Instead, we

might productively understand the contemporary immigration enforcement paradigm in the United States as an effort toward the *illegalization* of a population – the conjuring of legal (non)status and the corresponding precarity this instantiates. Indeed, rather than determined by birth or migration, immigration status is contingent upon multiple factors that include one’s ability to navigate complex legal processes, one’s life experiences and circumstances, the mobilization of popular opinion or political pressure, and the attitudes and behavior of state actors with heterogeneous mandates and jurisdictions (cf De Genova, 2002; Ngai, 2004; Coleman, 2009; Inda and Dowling, 2013).

The point we wish to emphasize here is that infrastructure along the territorial border is mostly secondary to this larger suite of governmental practices, even when considered under its own terms. Beginning in the early 1990s the US Border Patrol began to concentrate enforcement personnel in traditional urban crossing areas along the southwest border, with the belief that increasingly lengthy and dangerous crossing routes (outcomes conditioned by a *lack* of infrastructure in remote crossing areas) would act as a deterrent to future would-be unauthorized crossers (cf Rubio-Goldsmith et al., 2006; Dunn, 2010; Nevins, 2010). The efficacy of this enforcement strategy is questionable (cf Cornelius and Salehyan, 2007; Slack et al., 2013), while the wall is an incidental late-comer that has little operational impact. As former Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano famously stated, “You show me a 50-foot wall and I’ll show you a 51-foot ladder... That’s the way the border works” (Lacey, 2011). The U.S. government estimates that the border wall causes on average only a seven-second delay in the time it takes to cross the border without authorization, an event that often occurs in locations too remote for detection or interdiction (GAO, 2013).

For this reason, arguments that are too invested in “the wall” itself risk overstating its operational importance. While it may have tremendously damaging localized impacts on land-owners, indigenous peoples and ecosystems (cf Tamez, 2012; Sundberg, 2013), it has little strategic or practical effect other than the aesthetic naturalization of a condition of citizenship that would map transparently onto territorial nativity. If the West Bank wall reconfigures the spaces and rhythms of Palestinian life within the Occupied Territories, the barrier along the US/Mexico border is really a minor supplement to an overarching architecture of power directed inward toward differentiating the US population. Instead of viewing these walls as part of the same or equivalent “global” projects, it is vital that we develop analytic tools that account for their heterogeneous origins and effects, while simultaneously allowing this heterogeneity to inform the articulation of oppositional affinities.

Towards alternative articulations

What, then, do we propose as an alternative to narratives of equivalence or singularity, as a way to approach contemporary walling practices? How else might we articulate solidarity without obfuscating difference or reifying state-hegemonic narratives? We are inclined toward an approach to boundary and border walls that views these as produced by specific spatial-temporal social and political processes and actors, with indeterminate effects (Weizman, 2007). From this standpoint, the function, origin and impact of specific security walls within a larger nexus of “borderization” becomes an empirical question, to be established through careful exploration and research. This does not suggest that there are not connections to be drawn between sites, or that the walls considered above share nothing in common; indeed, quite the opposite is likely to be the

case. But such connections ought to be established as an *outcome* of research, political struggle and relationship building, rather than assumed *a priori*.

By approaching walling as a site practice that unfolds within, produces, and joins particular places, we can connect the diverse processes and actors that are involved in these walling practices and open them up for critical investigation and tactical intervention. For example, activists from immigrant justice organizations and Palestinian solidarity groups in Arizona have begun to discuss possible community and campus actions against the G4S Corporation, in concert with similar organizing efforts against the company in Palestine, the UK, and elsewhere. Known for its infamous human rights abuses, G4S provides imaging sensors and other technologies for Israeli checkpoints, and logistical support to US border agents (as well as personnel for prisons and detention centers the world over). But this company's contribution to state security practices is dependent on evolving and heterogeneous legal frameworks, operational objectives, budget and contractual negotiations. Rather than assuming that the company's activities or relationships with government are everywhere equivalent, it is attention to precisely *these* details – and the vulnerabilities they may reveal – that allow opportunities for strategic intervention and collaboration between geographically dispersed actors.

In order to realize such collaborative opportunities, we suggest an approach that can unpack the bounded logics of a site, inform analysis of bordering practices, and identify their multiple and indeterminate outcomes. Simultaneously, we should interrogate and oppose the rhetorical strategies that allow for heterogeneous sites to be collapsed into a singular “security” paradigm. This is important because the articulation of common interests, strategies and affinities is something that must be achieved through the process of research, struggle and relationship-building – rather than assumed as its premise.

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Figures:

Figure 1: University of Arizona – No More Deaths Mock Border Wall, photos by Grecia Ramirez and Karen Figueroa, courtesy of No More Deaths.

Figure 2: Mexico – Palestine “What’s the difference?”