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The Lie of the Wall

FREERK BOEDEL TJE AND HENK VAN HOUTUM

In his recent memoir *Born to Run*, Bruce Springsteen writes about his very first memories of listening to the music that inspired him as a young boy growing up in working-class New Jersey. He writes about the music that made him feel simultaneously happy and sad: “Records that summoned the joy and heartbreak of everyday life. This music was filled with deep longing (for some honest place of one’s own), a casual transcendent spirit, mature resignation and ... hope ... hope for that girl, that moment, that place, that night when everything changes, life reveals itself to you, and you, in return, are revealed.” For the young Springsteen in 1970s New Jersey, music was the horizon of opportunity and freedom. Because of this dream, the music of Bruce Springsteen himself has become widely regarded as an anthem of America’s blue-collar workers, at least during his formative years with the E-street band.

For many these rare pieces of great American music capture the heart and soul of an imagined America. In it, there is darkness and light. True, there is always a sense of loss, but in the void left by the death of the old loomed the unprecedented frontier of opportunity and fertility, a new beginning in the vast emptiness of uncharted territory. This, for centuries, was the frontier, the unending intersection between the familiar and the unknown. It was an incentive for adventure and rebirth away from a past unfulfilled, where young Americans, immigrants, and other explorers were looking for a way out in the midst of stagnation. Who wants to swim in the sand for long anyway?

The hateful rise of a dark spirit that characterized the last four years of the Trump presidency is nothing else than the end of that frontier. For, there is nowhere to go after the frontier closes down on a nation. In his presidential election campaign, Donald Trump portrayed himself as

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the archetype of the “American dream,” as someone who built a massive imperium out of scratch and as a political outsider who knew the concerns of average American citizens. The excitement of encountering the unfamiliar, the foreign, the unknown has been turned upside down by a populist incitement of fear, mistrust and hate, and has led to a reversing of the frontier. The paradoxical idea that freedom would not be a movement toward an opening, but a result of a closing: behold the frontier in reverse.

This conscious move toward “self-bordering” is what we, also in a literal sense, have seen at the impenetrable borderland between Mexico and the United States. The tall poles reveal a barren zone of graded earth and metal fences. The reality revealed, as the bright light emanating from the spotlights, is the closed-off frontier. This is not a wide-open country, nor a romantic dream, nor does it tackle the mounting problems of this generation. Instead, the border is increasingly creeping and penetrating inside the U.S itself.

The metal fence rising out of the Pacific Ocean near San Diego, and like a dragon’s tail winding all the way to the dry lands of the Arizona Desert, covers a large part of the American Southwest separating the United States from Mexico (see [Figure 1](#)). Like dragons that shed their skins, so has the fence. Over the past decade it has transformed its morphology. Border security has grown steadily since the early nineties of the last century alongside a growing restlessness about immigration and especially smuggling. The latter, smuggling, and that is often neglected in the



Figure 1. U.S.’s Dragon Tail.

Source: <http://edition.cnn.com/2017/01/27/politics/border-series-california/>.

“spectacularization” and rhetorical boosting of the need for such a wall, is for a large part an autoimmune result of a less visible, yet harsh, discriminative “paper wall” of visa obligations that has purposefully restricted the legal channels for regular migration. The events of September 2001 only led to a further restriction of the legal migration channels and as a consequence the fence once again changed shape, becoming longer, wider and higher. Massive amounts of resources were allocated to increase border security and to the creation of the Department of Homeland Security.

By now, swept up by a divisive politics of hate and populist media not only Mexican immigrants posed a threat but also potential terrorists entering through the southern borders, even though there was no earlier connection to any of the terror attacks. No matter what the problems really are, if only the curtain to the outside world would close, then the problems would go away as well.

It’s especially remarkable that the fence is built on a wide buffer zone. Not only the fence structure, but also a large zone of barren land and concrete, are solely accessible to U.S. border agents and under strict surveillance by cameras, airplanes and drones. And this frontier land is fully built on American territory. But it’s not just the land, it is also the direction the cameras point and the drones cover. Just like the movements and routines of the border agents in their vehicles, on quads and horses, all eyes are directed inwards, on what happens within the U.S. The binoculars gaze is faced backwards, in reverse to where the supposed enemy should be coming from. No doubt U.S. surveillance aims at intercepting irregular traffic from Mexico and beyond, but the observation and tracking of movement increasingly extends away from the immediate border into U.S. territory.

Beyond the physical extension of the border zone, authority has also extended, allowing border patrol agents to interrogate and demand IDs far from the border. The actual border is thus not where you may expect it to be. Currently, several permanent checkpoints exist, up to 80 Miles from the actual border. According to the Customs Union, they’re intended to intercept “illegals,” terrorists, and smugglers.

The fence rises out of the Pacific and divides the Californian city of San Diego on the north and the Mexican city of Tijuana on the south. Even though San Diego is the final frontier before the border, and officially part of the San Diego/Tijuana bi-national metropolitan region, it is by no means a border city like El Paso–Juarez in Texas. Although San Diego officially stretches out to the border communities of San Ysidro and Imperial Beach, the actual city limits of San Diego begin about 15 miles from the border.

The land in between is a somewhat messy area characterized by chaotic and decaying planning, outdated industrial complexes, part of the San Diego Bay, and an impenetrable nature reserve that partly serves as a military area. The long-term planning of the City of San Diego, focuses heavily on its vision as high-tech city and tourist destination. In particular, it includes high-profile projects like the construction of a new convention center, as well as a new stadium, the continuing focus on the high-tech sector of Sorrento Valley in the North, and the extension of a metro system from downtown to the University of California, San Diego.

Apart from a few small incentives, cross-border planning seems almost absent from any future vision. The blind eye to what is happening on the southern fringes of the city continues to push the development away from the border, effectively making the areas a consciously ignored zone, a kind of “geographical self-harm,” as if San Diego carries a subtle shame of being a border city.

A particular shadow side of this ignored land can be found right next to where the dragons tail fence rises out of the Pacific. Here, the San Diego Estuary State Park runs right up to the border. Like all State Parks, it should be open to the public, enabling visitors to freely enjoy the magical moment where the San Diego/Tijuana River meets the Pacific and birds and wildlife color the scene. This, however, is not the case. The gateway is closed and the park is only accessible on foot or bicycle. Parallel to the fence, a small road, which at times is flooded by the high tide of the estuary, leads toward the Ocean. About 1.5 miles from the gateway, next to the iron fence and light poles, a new recreational park has been constructed. It looks like any other urban park and it’s meant to be close to the border to be able to recreate, while you can talk with people on the other side.

This so-called “Friendship Park” provides a surreal sight in many ways. First, it is hardly accessible. The large parking lot designed to host at least 50 vehicles looks redundant since the entrance road is closed to traffic. The barbecue pits, picnic benches and the modern concrete toilet block remain unused. The only permanent visitors are the border guards, standing just next to the park on the edge where the buffer zone meets the fence while keeping a close watch on the people who make it to the park.

This haunting feeling of being watched over makes a striking contrast with the scenes from right across the dragons tail fence in Mexico. There in Tijuana, the fence is used as a national and public backyard. Anyone can walk right to the fence, whereas the beach on the U.S. side is closed, well before you can reach it. It is a popular Mexican tourist attraction and provides a background for endless photos. It has, despite or may be because of the dramatic political divide, interestingly been turned into

a recreation area and playground, whereas the Friendship Park on the U.S. side feels like a guarded ghost town from the Gold Rush. But now, the imagined “fortune hunters” of the old days are believed to be coming in massive numbers from the other side: from Mexico.

Thus, the border zone has been transformed into a no-man's land, eating away at the nation it's supposed to be protecting. The populist mantra of “America First” has thus led to a “deserting” into “America Alone” and making of a desert of the own borderland. The U.S. frontier, once the manifestation of the seeking for new encounters and possibilities, has become a moving border in reverse, withdrawing with every layer of security and with every drone in the sky, in the name of homeland security. The gaze is not directed outwards but rather inwards, penetrating deep into society, into offices, computers and phones, and into private spaces. In the name of a collective responsibility to target terrorism, nothing can remain private. The desire for total transparency demands a totalitarian-like collection of private data from the Internet, while phones are also tapped. Like in Michel Foucault's *panopticon*, any effort to exclude the dangerous outsider effectively imprisons and paralyzes the nation, and on a scale that endangers the very foundations of the American spirit, turning the country into a voluntary open-air prison, a golden cage.

On this scale, the former border between East and West Berlin, during the Cold War, provides the most prominent historical example of geographical self-caging. The East Berlin border featured an iron wall, with multiple fence structures and a wide buffer zone. Surveillance and strict monitoring were used to prevent people from fleeing to the West. Whereas the Wall in West Berlin was a symbol for suppressed freedom, the Wall in East Berlin provided a giant background for some of East Germany's biggest musical acts, and a refuge for subversive art and graffiti in the name of freedom. Paradoxically, for the so-called “leader of the free world,” the U.S border now increasingly resembles the Iron Curtain on the East German side. Its own iron curtain, falsely defined and spectacularised as wall, however, serves not to prevent people from leaving, but rather to block outsiders from entering, and just like in East Germany, it extends many miles into its own territory, allowing its own citizens to be followed and tracked.

The false promise that a giant wall of iron and steel would solve the nation's dire problems is typically reserved for dictatorships and other oppressive regimes. Globally, in recent years more fences have been erected than in any other historical period. More metal and barbed wire divide countries than ever before despite the overwhelming scientific

evidence that more fences and walls do not stop migration, smuggling and terrorism. As a result, people use other, often more dangerous routes, producing more deaths as a result. We've learned this from another closed border, fortress Europe, where approximately 50,000 people have lost their lives since the external border was shut. All borders do is raise the profits of traffickers who demand huge sums of money to get people across borders despite the walls.

Above all, higher fences create a prison-like system, with a strong inside and outside, where discrimination and feelings of exclusion create a fertile ground for radicalization and xenophobia. A big wall falsely externalizes internal fears and societal problems. A closed border leads to more paranoia not less. A border wall darkens the light and cuts off our sight, turning the outsider into an invisible enemy. Without outward vision and inclusive politics, the future of the U.S is at stake. Or in the words of Bruce Springsteen in his recent anti-Trump anthem "That's What Makes Us Great:"

Don't tell me a lie

And sell it as a fact

I've been down that road before

And I ain't goin' back.

RECOMMENDED READINGS

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