

Moving borders

The politics of dirt

Peter Nyers

Who can move? Who can speak? Who can act politically? The struggles of refugees and migrants have problematized conventional answers to these questions in a profound manner. Their struggles have demonstrated that, despite the considerable risks and dangers, new political subjects are being formed within securitized sites and border zones. Struggles by refugees and migrants around issues of detention, deportation, regularization and freedom of movement have debunked some of the most cherished assumptions about political subjectivity. While refugees, irregular migrants and the undocumented have long been associated with victimhood, helplessness and dependency, recent theorizations of citizenship challenge these assumptions, showing how migrants negotiate, contest and evade borders and, in doing so, constitute themselves as political subjects. These studies represent a shift in how we conceptualize citizenship, from a formal status to an enactment of political subjectivity through unexpected, unfamiliar and irregular acts. They also enable an appreciation of what a growing and fascinating literature calls ‘noncitizen citizenships’.¹

Some commentators, especially those working from the ‘autonomous migration’ perspective, have posited that there is something primary – or, better, uncontrollable, indefinable, uncapturable – about human movement, with borders and their various apparatuses of control coming only afterwards.² We typically think of migrants confronting borders. Less often do we consider the ways in which borders are also always following migrants, being forced to adapt to the inventiveness of human mobility. For the migrant is not the only mobile agent at the border. The border, too, moves. While there has been some very interesting work on the proliferation of mobile borders in their virtual forms (e.g. biometrics and dataveillance),³ there is comparatively little analysis of the movement of borders in material terms. When I speak of the moving border, I mean exactly that: the movement of the territory – the dirt, the soil – that constitutes the border. In this context, smuggling takes on new and quite literal terms. It is not only people and goods, licit or illicit, that are being smuggled across the border; it is the border itself.

New materialisms?

How should we evaluate the significance of the movement of the object (that is to say, the soil: dirt) that constitutes the territorial border? This kind of investigation requires some critical distance from the assumption that agency is the exclusive domain of human subjects. Usually, objects are not afforded any sort of agency but are almost always ‘used’ or guided by human actors, assumed to possess full agency. The result is that we tend to ignore what William Walters describes as the ‘vital role that matter and material formations play in the possibility and operability of discourses

of security'.⁴ But what if we take objects of security as the starting point rather than the end result of an act of securitization? How, in the context of the border zone, do things become actors, or what Bruno Latour calls 'actants'? These questions pose some difficult epistemological problems, as things do not readily speak for themselves. Yet as Nietzsche says, 'We are looking for words; perhaps we are also looking for ears.'⁵ Perhaps, then, we can push the boundaries of political agency by seeking out the effects of objects.

The emergence of a so-called 'new materialisms' in the humanities and social sciences is important in this context.⁶ This approach seeks to problematize the hierarchical distinctions regularly made between agential humans and inanimate objects, forcing us to re-evaluate our received understandings of agency, causality, predictability and intentionality. It argues that there is no clear hierarchy of agency and causality, despite the common hubris that assigns agency exclusively to humans. Instead, human actors are only ever part of a broader assemblage of human and nonhuman actants, or what Jane Bennett describes as a 'spectrum' of 'agentic capacities', contesting what Bennett calls 'human exceptionalism' – that is, the 'human tendency to understate the degree to which people, animals, artifacts, technologies, and elemental forces share powers and operate in dissonant conjunction with each other'. From this viewpoint, humans and things are coeval, co-present and co-constitutive of the worlds which we inhabit. Objects, Bennett proposes, have the 'curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle', in a way that 'draws attention to an efficacy of objects in excess of human meanings, designs, or purposes they express or serve'. Materiality is thus conceived as 'as much force as entity, as much energy as matter, as much intensity as extension'.⁷

How does something such as dirt move from the banal to the exceptional, and back again? This question can be addressed empirically by investigating the securitization of dirt in border zones. Dirt is an evocative descriptor for border politics, partaking of the classical image of the border as the so-called 'line in the sand'.⁸ But it is also something quite literal: omnipresent, it covers the boots and clothing of unauthorized migrants and the border patrol alike. In comparison to the vast literature on the movement of people across borders, there is relatively little analysis of the movement of the physical terrain – acts of *moving dirt* – in border crossings. If objects can have a force or direction that is not always controlled, directed or predictable by human beings, can dirt have a force or direction of its own?

To address this question, I analyse two cases involving the movement of dirt, soil and earth in contested border zones. The first takes place along the US–Mexico border and involves the movement of dirt *to* the border. The second takes place along the Israel–Lebanon border and involves the removal of dirt *from* the border. One case involves a re-territorialization of the border, the other, a de-territorialization. In each case, the movement of dirt raises fundamental questions about the historically shifting meanings of land and territory, soil and earth, and their relationship to political identity and community.

USA–Mexico

Tons of dirt are being moved to fill the canyons, valleys, gullies and other 'border corridors' along the US–Mexico border. This movement of dirt is part of the construction of 700 miles of new fencing along the border, as mandated by the 2006 Secure Fence Act. This is being done to fulfil the state's desire to striate the border by creating a level upon which to build physical fortifications (fences, roads, bridges, etc.). The operational aims of the Secure Fence Act are twofold: first, to create, enhance or fortify barriers to prevent unauthorized border crossings; second, to refashion the terrain of the border in order enable border patrol agents to do their job more effectively. The

first aim is achieved primarily through a classic border technology: the construction of a metal fence, in some places double- or even triple-layer. However, the fortification of the border is also achieved another way: filling in virtually every ditch, gully and valley; and smoothing over every fold, rise and mountain along the borderline. This is done to prevent migrants from utilizing irregularities in the local terrain to bypass the fence. Vales, gorges, dells, hollows and other so-called 'irregular' geological formations are subject to redesign according to the operational needs of the border patrol. Both of these operational aims require the massive movement of dirt.

The scope of this movement of dirt can be seen in one of the most controversial sites for fence building: Smuggler's Gulch near San Diego, California. In the past, border patrol agents would have to negotiate treacherous switchback dirt roads that were cut into the sides of the Gulch. At a cost of US\$59 million, 100,000 dump-truck loads filled the Gulch and several other cross-border canyons. This was a 'cut and fill' project, so-called because the tops of nearby mountains were cut off to provide the earth necessary to fill the canyons and gulches. The two million cubic yards of earth that were removed from these mountain tops is enough dirt to fill the Empire State Building. Now, with the berms bridging two canyons, agents are able to drive straight across, resulting in much quicker response times for apprehending unauthorized migrants.



This movement of this dirt was enabled politically through various 'securitizations' of the public policy process. Previous plans by Border Patrol to fill Smuggler's Gulch were hampered by environmental conservation laws that protect the habitats of endangered and threatened species in the area. Of particular concern was the potential for ecological damage to the Tijuana River National Estuarine Research Reserve, which is only 400 feet from Smuggler's Gulch. With the passage of the Secure Fence Act in 2006, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) was empowered to apply waivers to federal, state and local laws and regulations that might stand in the way of fence-building projects. For example, in a form of exceptionalism, the DHS waived all environmental and property laws that might regulate the project's implementation or impact. The range of laws that were suspended by DHS are extensive and include, among others, environmental reviews, water and wildlife protection, and laws regulating the use of farmland, historic sites and Native American graves.

One striking aspect of this fence-building is that it has transformed topographical verticality into a pure horizontal. The natural elevations and folds of the landscape are smoothed over and made level. The specificity of the local is literally bulldozed over to make way for the abstract geopolitical space of the international borderline. The effect is to erase history, context, and locality. 'Smuggler's Gulch' now exists only in name: there are very few smugglers (migrants have moved east for their border crossing attempts) and no gulch (only a levelled landscape). It also works to efface, erode and undermine the complex ecological systems that run across the borderline. At the same time, however, the utilization of dirt as an ally in border policing is never complete, and can take turns that human agents may not expect. For example, the waiving of environmental laws has resulted in significant erosion of the new embankments that have replaced the canyons of Smuggler's Gulch. Like the migrants, the dirt continues to move of its own accord. The use of the exception has backfired: as the soil erodes into the Tijuana estuary the local ecological habitat is being destroyed *and* the future ability of the border patrol to use the new roads is undermined.

Israel–Lebanon

During the period of Israel's occupation and control over the 'Security Zone' in South Lebanon (1982–2000), many layers of fertile topsoil from the region were backhoed and then unilaterally transferred by truck to Israeli settlements across the border.⁹ Most of the soil theft from this no-man's land occurred between 1995 and 1998. The excavated earth and clay was transported to Israel for use in agriculture, orchards and road-building. The excavation left the surface level lowered by one metre and much of the terrain became pocketed with pits, some of them up to 3 metres deep. This act of soil theft on such a massive scale was largely unreported in the Western media, although the Lebanese parliament did issue complaints to the United Nations, the Arab League and the Israeli parliament. After initially denying such acts, Israel admitted to the theft after Beirut-based newspapers published pictures of 'the 2 km wide Al-Marj basin, which was once fertile and green and now looks like a huge mud patch crisscrossed by bulldozer tracks'.¹⁰ *The Economist* then picked up the story and described the landscape as resembling 'an ugly open-cast mine'.¹¹

The Israeli photographer and experimental filmmaker Illan Salama Ortar undertook a photo-documentation of the Israel–Lebanon border zone in the late 1990s. While doing so, Ortar came across a number of border cairns: markers made of brick and stone, placed there by French and British military surveyors shortly after World War I in order to mark the borderline between the French mandate of Lebanon and the British mandate of Palestine. As with most colonial borders, cartographers in London and Paris drew them up far away. In the local context, these borderlines were completely arbitrary. So in order to solidify the authority of these mandates, the border cairns were symbolically anchored deep in the local soil, becoming monuments of the will of Great Powers that would outlast the Powers themselves.¹²

When the colonial surveyors initially established the cairn, the bottom half was deeply rooted in the earth; it now stands eight feet above the ground. The bottom of



the stones that comprised the top part of the cairn are dark brown, reflecting the dirt that once covered them. The border stones that were once an incongruous feature of the landscape have emerged as key figures in measuring the changing features of the landscape and their political meaning. As Ortar and Wright state: 'the cairn – initially the most arbitrary and incongruous feature of all – has ended up being the yardstick against which to measure changes in land use and meaning'.¹³ In other words, the stones tell a story, without words, but rather through the soil that is marked irregularly on them. What story

does the border marker tell? It tells the extent of the earth theft, to be sure. But it also demonstrates the differences between land as an expression of territory and land as a commodity, a resource that can be trucked away to another country's own economic development.

What implications does this act of theft have for the model of politics based on sovereignty–population–territory? In its classic formulation, this model accords the capacity to move to the first two elements and denies it to the third. Sovereigns can move to the extent that their control over territory can extend or contract over time. In other words, the borderlines may change but the territory remains static. Similarly, populations may move in and out of territories, willingly or coerced, but the territory itself is again assumed to be the same. The story of the soil theft problematizes these political equations. In this event, the earth itself becomes a protagonist. A sovereign did not extend its geopolitical borders and annex the territory; instead it transferred the soil

to its own territory. It is not the people who have been uprooted and displaced so much as the land beneath their feet. The territory itself has been displaced.

Similar to the changes at Smuggler's Gulch, the border stone marks a shift in the realm of the perceptible from the horizontal to the vertical, in time and space. Space, because our eye is no longer drawn to how the cairn distributes territory horizontally over separate geopolitical entities. Instead, it now marks the vertical loss of land, soil, and territory. Whereas the bricks on the top half of the marker are coloured the same weather-stained ochre as the surrounding territory, the bricks on the bottom 3 feet are a red-brown colour, identical to the dirt that once covered them. The border cairn thus acts as a 'perpendicular marker' or 'geopolitical yardstick' that demonstrates the drop in the level of the surface.¹⁴ In this way, the border stone disrupts the assumption of the seamless link between land and soil: as Ortar says: 'here the very idea of "land" has, so to speak, been split open and sapped of its substance; the empty husk of territory can be returned at no particular loss.'¹⁵ The Israeli army may have abandoned Lebanese territory but took its substance, its soil. The absence of what once was is made present by the traces of soil left on the stone.

The vertical measure of the border stone is also expressed temporally. This is because it serves as a reminder of other, past demarcations of the borders; of geopolitical entities that no longer formally exist (Palestine); and forms of authorities that are no longer considered credible (colonial powers). If, following Rancière, politics changes what people can see and hear, what power do objects have in this respect? The border cairns are an example of disruption by an object: we remember past, now less legitimate, borderings. The border stone marks a confusion about the colonial past and the colonial present. Objects demonstrate a force of their own.

Notes

1. Engin F. Isin and Greg M. Nielson, eds, *Acts of Citizenship*, Zed Books, London, 2008; Rutvica Andrijasevic, *Migration, Agency and Citizenship in Sex Trafficking*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2010; Linda Bosniak, *The Citizen and the Alien*, Princeton University Press, Princeton NJ, 2008; Anne McNevin, *Contesting Citizenship: Irregular Migrants and New Frontiers of the Political*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2011; Peter Nyers and Kim Rygiel, eds, *Citizenship, Migrant Activism, and the Politics of Movement*, Routledge, London, 2012; Vicki Squire, ed., *The Contested Politics of Mobility: Borderzones and Irregularity*, Routledge, London, 2011.
2. Dimitris Papadopoulos, Niamh Stephenson and Vassilis Tsianos, *Escape Routes: Control and Subversion in the 21st Century*, Pluto, London, 2008.
3. Louise Amoore, 'Biometric Borders: Governing Mobilities in the War on Terror', *Political Geography* 25, 2006, pp. 336–51; Benjamin J. Muller, *Security, Risk, and the Biometric State: Governing Borders and Bodies*, Routledge, London, 2010.
4. William Walters, keynote address to the workshop 'Putting Citizenship in Motion', Institute on Globalization and the Human Condition, McMaster University, Ontario, 24–25 October 2009. One notable exception is Claudia Aradau, 'Security that Matters: Critical Infrastructure and Objects of Protection', *Security Dialogue*, vol. 41, no. 5, 2010, pp. 491–514.
5. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, Vintage, New York, 1974, p. 285.
6. Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, eds, *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics*, Duke University Press, Durham NC, 2010.
7. Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, Duke University Press, Durham NC, 2010, pp. 30, 34, 6, 20.
8. Noel Parker and Nick Vaughan-Williams, 'Lines in the Sand? Towards an Agenda for Critical Border Studies', *Geopolitics*, vol. 14, no. 3, 2009, pp. 582–7.
9. Ilana Salama Ortar and Stephen Wright, 'Inadvertent Monuments', *Third Text*, vol. 20, no. 3, 2006, p. 373.
10. Zeina Khodr, 'Stealing Land Again', *Al-Ahram Weekly Online* 403, 18 December 1998, <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/1998/403/re4.htm>.
11. 'The Great Terrain Robbery', *The Economist*, 12 November 1998.
12. Ortar and Wright, 'Inadvertent Monuments', p. 373.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 374.
14. Ilana Salama Ortar, 'Adamot: Land without Earth and Corporeal Memory: A Conceptual Theft of the Border and Civic Performance Art', *Third Text*, vol. 23, no. 5, 2009, pp. 657–68.
15. Ortar and Wright, 'Inadvertent Monuments', p. 374.