

Spray Paint on the Border Wall:  
Challenging the Waning Sovereignty of the Nation-State

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**Abstract:** In *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty* Wendy Brown explores the contemporary phenomenon of wall building by nation-states. Brown links the desire to erect border walls to the weakening of state sovereignty and examines the symbolic roles that walls fulfill as representations of authority. The theological and theatrical elements that Brown ascribes to border walls are subsequently used by graffiti artists who oppose the walls. The performative role that walls play makes them an ideal platform for political critique. This paper uses Brown's analysis of the performative element of border walls to explore the connection between the symbolic functions of the walls and border-wall graffiti art.

**Keywords:** border walls, graffiti, art, protest, nation-state, sovereignty

In *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty* Wendy Brown explores the contemporary phenomenon of wall-building by nations around the globe. Brown links the desire to erect border walls to what she perceives as the weakening of state sovereignty, and she examines the symbolic roles that walls fulfill as representations of authority. Brown claims that border walls function performatively by engaging theological and theatrical characteristics. These performative characteristics are used, in turn, by graffiti artists who oppose the walls. Artists such as Ron English, Banksy, and countless others find border walls particularly inviting canvases for their work. Art draws attention to the controversies surrounding the walls, while the contested nature of the walls draws attention to the art. The performative role that walls play politically makes them an ideal platform from which to critique the status quo.

If border walls existed solely as barriers blocking access into a nation, border-wall graffiti art would be no more effective than graffiti found elsewhere. It is precisely because border walls function symbolically that wall art becomes particularly controversial. In this paper I will use Brown's analysis of the performative element of border walls to explore the connection between the symbolic functions of the walls and border-wall graffiti art. Analyzing examples of graffiti art on the United States-Mexico and Israel-Palestine border walls, I argue that the states' efforts to shore up sovereignty by means of theologically and theatrically performative border walls is exploited by artists who wish to challenge that authority.

### **I. Wall Paradoxes**

Brown finds the phenomenon of wall-building riddled with contradictions. Border walls are often highly ineffective in dealing with the problems they purportedly address, yet nations are willing to spend enormous amounts of money building them. Despite the lack of results, border walls are often popular projects with the public in the nations that construct them. Brown highlights three paradoxes underlying the act of wall-building. The first is the incongruity between the desire for a world without borders and the building of walls. Although an ever-greater number of people perceive the world as interconnected economically and politically, border walls are built by nations around the globe to block access and sever connectivity. The second paradox is a conflict between universalization and exclusion. The democratic ideal suggests that societies should be open and inclusive, yet border crossings are experienced very differently depending on one's

economic status and ethnic or racial heritage. The third deals with the inability of a physical barrier to address modern potential threats. Walls may have been effective defenses when combat was conducted on foot or horseback, but modern weapons, such as explosives or biochemical toxins, and networks of information cannot be stopped by walls.<sup>1</sup>

Brown describes the present world order as “post-Westphalian.” While she does not consider nation-state sovereignty obsolete, she sees the nation-state as an idea belonging to the past that continues to shape and define the present.<sup>2</sup> In the order established by the Peace of Westphalia in 1648, the political world is comprised of sovereign nation-states that have the ability to decide how they will interact (for example, engage in commerce or go to war). Wall-building in contemporary times is not addressed toward the actions of other nation-states. Border walls are not built to protect against advancing armies from other nations; they are built to stop non-state actors including migrants, smugglers, criminals, or terrorists.<sup>3</sup> They respond to a world of informal and less organized powers that may represent movements or groups but also may be comprised of individuals acting alone.

Brown creates a composite list of the characteristic features of sovereignty: supremacy, perpetuity over time, decisionism, absoluteness and completeness, nontransferability, and specified jurisdiction.<sup>4</sup> This list highlights a nation-state’s

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<sup>1</sup> Wendy Brown, *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty* (New York: Zone Books, 2010), 20

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, 21

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, 21

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, 22

claim to full authority within its territorial boundary. Brown's claim that the sovereignty of the nation-state is waning is based on her contention that key characteristics of sovereignty are migrating from the nation-state to financially and religiously legitimated violence.<sup>5</sup>

This migration of sovereignty from the nation-state to other forces is, for Brown, at the root of the phenomenon of wall-building. Although walls are ostensibly built as a display of power, their actual function has the opposite effect. Brown describes border walls as "hyperbolic tokens" of sovereignty and explains that "like all hyperbole, they reveal a tremulousness, vulnerability, dubiousness, or instability at the core of what they aim to express—qualities that are themselves antithetical to sovereignty and thus elements of its undoing."<sup>6</sup> Far from displaying strength, border walls communicate a fear of the outside and an inability to challenge incoming forces directly.

Brown identifies another paradox of border walls: the barriers erected to mark a nation-state's borders serve to blur the distinction between the inside and outside of the nation. Recently constructed border walls tend to divide richer and poorer countries. Immigration and criminal activity that crosses borders are often manifestations of powerful underlying economic systems. The failure of nation-states to govern these economic systems effectively through law and politics has led to a desire to control their manifestations by policing and blockading. The increased

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 23

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 24

militarization of the borders clouds the distinction between the police and the military and between internal criminals and external enemies.<sup>7</sup>

The walls' failure to stop the flow of people and illegal goods across borders begs the following questions: Why do governments build them? And why do so many citizens support their construction? Brown's response is that walls function theatrically by "project[ing] an image of sovereign jurisdictional power and an aura of the bounded and secure nation."<sup>8</sup> The physical mass of the wall and the economic resources it represents (materials, labor, etc.) are intended to display the strength of the nation-state. In spending extravagant amounts of money on the construction of the wall, the nation-state advertises the fact that it has money to spend. The nation-state bound by walls appears to be in control, alert to and actively addressing external challenges. On the other hand, the very existence of the walls acknowledges that the border is unable to block migration and smuggling. If those activities were held in check, there would be no need to fortify the border. The theatrical function of the wall—its display of power—is undercut by the impulse that caused it to be built in the first place.<sup>9</sup>

In order to explain walls' theatrical function, Brown turns to the language of theology. The theological dimension of political sovereignty is the belief that state sovereignty is accepted by the people as a secularized version of divine sovereignty. In other words, citizens trust that their sovereign state can provide protection and security in much the same way as a divine sovereign. In times of anxiety, walls

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 24-25

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 25

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 25

project an image of power and generate theological awe.<sup>10</sup> Brown borrows Heidegger's term and explains that walls generate a "reassuring world picture" by shoring up the impression of containment and security.<sup>11</sup> If, as Brown suggests, nation-state sovereignty is waning, then citizens are likely to feel increasingly anxious and in need of the reassurance walls provide.

Brown draws on the work of Carl Schmitt to explain how border walls enact the relationship between the political and the theological. All sacred places have clearly defined boundaries that separate the holy from the profane. While a boundary, such as the walls of a temple or a simple stone circle, demarcates the sacred space physically, it also functions performatively by separating it from the ordinary space surrounding it. The enclosure itself, Brown writes, "brings the sacred into being."<sup>12</sup> In the same way, fortification walls surrounding medieval cities performed symbolically as well as practically by emphasizing the importance of the entity enclosed within the boundary. Brown encapsulates Schmitt's claims succinctly: "The fence founds and relates sacred space and sovereign power."<sup>13</sup> Consequently, Brown easily identifies a theological aspect of the current border-wall projects that attempts to shore up nation-state sovereignty.

Brown speculates that as nation-states struggle with the loss of control, the theological rhetoric affirming their sovereignty becomes more pronounced in order to shore up their fading authority. The public responds to what is perceived as the nation-state's loss of control by seeking security and protection, and, again, the

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 26

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 26

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 46

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 47

theological function of sovereignty expands to address that need. Brown suggests, however, that this very process of establishing legitimacy through theological rhetoric simultaneously diminishes the sovereignty of the nation-state.<sup>14</sup> The religions to which the states appeal to bolster their authority are themselves transnational communities.<sup>15</sup> Because religious authority does not map neatly onto the nation-state, the states' efforts to sidle up to theological power are often ineffective or even counterproductive.

Although the many border walls around the world have been built for various purposes, Brown identifies a number of common traits among them. Each wall is a response by the nation-state to the forces of globalization. In addition, Brown makes the following claims: "All generate significant effects in excess of or even counter to their stated purposes; none really 'work' in the sense of resolving or even substantially reducing the conflicts, hostilities, or traffic at which they officially aim; each is built as provisional while taking shape as permanent; and each is expensive, yet strikingly popular."<sup>16</sup> The walls also share construction and surveillance technologies, as well as the public and private contractors who build them. The many similarities of walls around the globe serve to legitimate their existence. Any nation-state wanting to build a wall can point to countless others as examples; their proliferation around the globe makes them seem reasonable.

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 62

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 64

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 27

Finally, border walls share one more trait in common: they are often sites of protest murals and graffiti.<sup>17</sup>

## **II. United States-Mexico Border Wall**

Construction of the U.S.- Mexico border fence began in 1990 and has continued sporadically. Legislation passed in recent years, specifically the 2005 Real ID Act and the 2006 Secure Fence Act, cleared the way for an 850-mile stretch of barrier along the border in three states. This legislation has overcome numerous legal challenges, including laws regulating water and air pollution, endangered species protection, animal migration, historic preservation, farmland protection, and Native American sacred lands provisions.<sup>18</sup>

By overturning existing laws to permit the construction of the wall, legislators create a “state of emergency” at the border. Quoting critics of the Israel-Palestine wall Ariella Azoulay and Adi Ophir, Brown describes the wall-building process as “not a new law but a no-law situation”—an apt description of the U.S.-Mexico border as well.<sup>19</sup> The wall is constructed to preserve the sovereignty of the state, yet its very construction requires the state to suspend its laws. The old order is not being replaced by a new regime; rather, it is set aside temporarily and the rhetoric of the state of emergency is used to legitimate violence. The supposedly temporary nature of the state of emergency that called for the construction of the wall is belied by the seeming permanence of the wall’s material presence. Both the size of the wall and the expense incurred to build it suggest that the wall is

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 27

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 36

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 31



permanent.<sup>20</sup> Azoulay and Ophir explain that the process of building a border wall is “not simply a major project under construction; it is an unfinished project in which nontermination seems structural rather than accidental.”<sup>21</sup> The ongoing construction can stretch out indefinitely, leaving nearby residents in a constant state of flux.

Although the border wall seems to be well received in the mainstream media, communities closest to the border are generally less supportive. Those who live nearest the wall tend to have the strongest economic ties with Mexico and are able to witness the wall’s limited effectiveness firsthand. Residents of border communities see that the wall fails to deter migrants, merely rerouting them to more isolated areas.<sup>22</sup> This rerouting of migrants’ to more difficult terrain has undermined two of the wall’s stated purposes: security and prevention of immigration. Travel through geographically dangerous areas, such as mountains and deserts, has increased the number of migrant deaths while in transit and has inspired others to migrate to the U.S. permanently, rather than travel seasonally for work.<sup>23</sup>

On April 1, 2011, American graffiti artist Ron English installed a mural on the United States-Mexico border wall in a rural area outside the small town of Penitas, Texas.<sup>24</sup> The mural depicted a two-headed donkey with one side decorated in the

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 31

<sup>21</sup> Ariella Azoulay and Adi Ophir, “The Monster’s Tail,” in *Against the Wall: Israel’s Barrier to Peace*, ed. Michael Sorkin (New York: The New Press, 2005), 2-27.

<sup>22</sup> Brown, 37

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 38

<sup>24</sup> “POPaganda: The Art and Crimes of Ron English,” accessed December, 12, 2011, <http://www.popaganda.com/blog1.php/2011/04/01/fun-on-the-border-april-fool-s-day>

colors of the U.S. flag and the other side in the colors of the Mexican flag.<sup>25</sup> The painting demonstrates the closeness of the relationship between the two nations. In addition to citizens sharing ethnic and familial ties, the two economies are also deeply intertwined. The border wall purports to stop illegal immigration and drug trafficking (problems that in U.S. political rhetoric are perceived to emerge from Mexico and infiltrate the U.S.), yet migrant labor is necessary to keep the U.S. economy functioning, and drug trafficking occurs because there is demand north of the border.

Later that same day, English crossed the border into Reynosa, Mexico, with a second art installation that resembles an amusement park sign indicating the height requirement for a roller coaster. This piece, however, depicts Uncle Sam pointing to a spectrum of skin tones with the caption: “You must be this color to enter this country.”<sup>26</sup> This is no subtle work of art requiring careful exegesis to discern its hidden meaning. English’s piece crassly and blatantly speaks the unspeakable, articulating the racist sentiment lurking beneath the surface of acceptable public discourse. His overtly racist statement is intentionally shocking and jarring in its forthrightness. The racism that often underscores debates on immigration is typically couched in the language of keeping the nation secure from criminals, drug traffickers, and terrorists, while ignoring the fact that the vast majority of migrants

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<sup>25</sup> Within a week of its installation, the mural was defaced: the “Mexico” half of the mural was torn off and only the “America” half remained. Bryan Curtis, “The Border’s Merry Pranksters,” *The Daily Beast*, June 30, 2011, accessed December 12, 2011, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2011/06/30/billboard-liberation-artistically-redesigning-the-u-s-mexico-border-fence.html>

<sup>26</sup> “POPaganda: The Art and Crimes of Ron English,” accessed December, 12, 2011, <http://www.popaganda.com/blog1.php/2011/04/01/fun-on-the-border-april-fool-s-day>

are in the U.S. seeking employment. Using the language of public safety, those who advocate strict border policies for racist reasons are able to mask their motivations in terms that are perceived to be less offensive. Those reluctant to identify publicly as racists or white supremacists can still advance their causes using the language of national security. Patriotism, respect for U.S. laws, and even national sovereignty are pressed into service as buzzwords substituting for the unacceptably racist sentiment that migrants are not worthy to enter the country.

### III. Israel-Palestine Wall

In the foreword to William Parry's *Against the Wall: The Art of Resistance in Palestine*, Ron English writes, "The thing about a wall is that people tend to see only one side of it, the side they are on. And for those with enough distance from the wall, it's altogether out of mind... So how do you bring a wall that's far enough away to ignore, close enough to see both sides? For me, the answer is simple. Paint it. Make it easier to see."<sup>27</sup>

In "The Monster's Tail," Azoulay and Ophir explain that making violence invisible is a central task for modern liberal democracies. They distinguish between two types of violence that are operative in Israel-Palestine: spectacular violence involves an "outburst of physical forces that tear apart bodies and objects," while suspended violence operates when "insinuation and deterrence take the place of material contact with the exposed body."<sup>28</sup> Nation-states often prefer to operate in the "quieter" mode of suspended violence so as to deny the employment of violent

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<sup>27</sup> William Parry, *Against the Wall: The Art of Resistance in Palestine* (London: Lawrence Hill Books, 2010), 6

<sup>28</sup> Azoulay and Ophir, 3-4

tactics on the part of the state. Azoulay and Ophir explain that this is often more destructive than overt spectacular violence: “Suspended violence is effective without bursting out because it forbids, deters, and delays, complicates simple actions, undermines preferences, undercuts daily schedules, drives people crazy, and sometimes even kills. Its impact is often more, not less, disastrous than that of spectacular violence.”<sup>29</sup>

Like Brown, Azoulay and Ophir find theatrical and theological elements in their analysis of the suspended violence of the Israel-Palestine situation. They describe the gates and checkpoints that the Palestinians must cross as a “network of theaters” on which the trials of their daily existence play out. The condition of continuous crisis at the wall has not “created the theater where this existence is represented; it has only given this theater a more visible, more threatening presence, creating for it a stage whose size is enormous.”<sup>30</sup> Addressing the theological aspects of the situation, Azoulay and Ophir describe the Jewish settlements in the West Bank as areas that the government is unwilling to sacrifice. In a sense, this land is sacred. By contrast, the Palestinians are those whose lives the messianic fundamentalists believe must be sacrificed.<sup>31</sup> The construction of the wall enables “the transformation of the territories into a sacred space, a zone of exception at the outskirts of law produced entirely without residue through an unrestrained interplay between suspended and spectacular violence, into a dynamic

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 5

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 23

<sup>31</sup> Azoulay and Ophir, 17

of destruction and construction, fragmentation, segregation, and reintegration.”<sup>32</sup> As Azoulay and Ophir demonstrate, both theatricality and theology are at play in the performative function of the wall.

In 2007 the British artist Banksy organized a project in Bethlehem to call attention to Palestinian poverty and to what he regards as the injustice of the Israeli wall. Banksy invited street artists from around the world, including Ron English, Blu, Swoon, and about a dozen others, to participate in the project he called Santa’s Ghetto. Paying customers were invited to bid on original artwork in an auction to benefit local charities, but they had to travel to Bethlehem in person to do it. In addition to creating artwork for the auction, the artists used their time in Bethlehem to paint murals on the wall.<sup>33</sup>

While some artists choose to encapsulate their messages in pictorial images that require interpretation, others opt for writing their opinions in plain English (or Arabic). Some examples of this approach include “To exist is to resist,” “The only peace Israel wants is a piece of my land,” and one written backward as though on glass, “The world sees through this wall. When will you?”<sup>34</sup> With these simple yet thought-provoking messages, the artists defy the authority of the wall.

The longest message written on the wall is an open letter from South African peace activist Farid Esack. Esack wrote the letter in 2009 and a charitable organization painted the nearly two thousand-word message on the wall. Covering 2.6 kilometers of the wall, the letter is a powerful statement of solidarity with the

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 20-1

<sup>33</sup> Parry, 9

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 126, 127, and 175

Palestinians. Esack describes the history of apartheid in South Africa and relates it to the Palestinian experience. He writes: “An injury inflicted on others invariably comes back to haunt the aggressors; it is not possible to tear at another’s skin and not to have one’s own humanity diminished in the process. In the face of this monstrosity, The Apartheid Wall, we offer an alternative: Solidarity with the people of Palestine.”<sup>35</sup> Esack’s message challenges all readers to stand in solidarity with the Palestinians, acknowledging that some Israelis also oppose the wall.

While popular reaction to Banksy’s 2007 project was generally positive, some Palestinians objected to the idea of ‘beautifying’ the Wall.<sup>36</sup> Occasionally, pieces were misunderstood, such as Banksy’s silhouette of an Israeli soldier checking a donkey’s identification papers. Banksy intended to critique the absurd requirement of some Israeli security checkpoints at which traveling with a donkey calls for an additional security permit. Some of the locals, however, interpreted the mural as representing the Palestinian people with the figure of a donkey, which is considered an insult.<sup>37</sup>

#### **IV. Conclusion**

The many paradoxes that underlie the phenomenon of nation-state wall building make border walls an easy target for the social critique of graffiti artists. The walls attempt to display the power and stability of the nation-state, yet they are created only by suspending law. They claim to promote the safety of citizens, yet criminal activity increases in proximity to the border walls. The walls mark the

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid, 169

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, 10

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, 110

boundaries of the free, open, democratic societies that build them; yet, according to Brown, they erode the very sovereignty they aim to shore up.<sup>38</sup>

Parry enumerates the advantages of the graffiti artists' approach to challenging border walls in this way: the celebrity of Banksy and the other artists engages the attention of many who would otherwise have little interest in the plight of the Palestinians; the wit and appeal of the images open minds to the reality of the asymmetrical power struggle between the Israelis and Palestinians; and the skillful use of mass media, especially the internet, sends the message out to the world.<sup>39</sup> Parry explains: "The spray can hasn't forced Israel to stop building its highly controversial Wall, but... it's a formidable weapon in the struggle for hearts, minds, and justice... That ability to challenge Israel's narrative and to influence the Western public's perception of the Wall and the broader conflict is as rare as it is invaluable."<sup>40</sup> By engaging their theological and theatrical performative functions, the walls themselves create a space for the very critique that would see them torn down.

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<sup>38</sup> Brown, 38

<sup>39</sup> Parry, 9

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, 9

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