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Liam Connell

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## A Wall of Words: Representing Border Securitisation in Contemporary Fiction

Liam Connell

Since the financial crisis of 2007-2008 it has been commonplace to argue that globalisation is in retreat. The period following the Cold War saw decades of international integration of the world economy, represented by streamlined trade logistics, a growing financial and immaterial economy and the formation of trading blocs tailored to ease the free movement of goods, services and, in the right circumstances, of people. However, in the last decade, these twentieth-century verities have come under increasing tension. During a long period of economic stagnation, successive populist governments have turned to nationalist rhetoric in order to justify protectionist solutions to the problems of stalled growth. Alongside the noise of tariffs and trading wars the most visible signal of this development has been a substantial rhetorical investment in the power of the securitised border to cure the political ills of the nation state. This rhetoric is not wholly empty and has been accompanied by a new fashion for border fortification, which has involved substantial investment in physical barriers and technological securitisation of the national frontier. Nevertheless, this trend for building walls should not disguise the fact that the vocal advocacy of border fortification has been far more conspicuous than the construction of physical barriers. A clear illustration of this can be found in the case of the United States, where Donald Trump made the building of a wall the touchstone policy of his presidency and the enduring issue of his campaign for re-election. Notwithstanding the fact that border fortification has been a part of US politics since the Clinton administration, the promise to build a wall along the border with Mexico was the defining policy of the 2016 and 2020 Republican candidate.<sup>1</sup> After his election in 2016, the President continued to campaign and to berate Congress for funds to support this construction. However, as of September 2019 it was reported that only a ‘total of 57 miles of replacement barrier and nine miles of new secondary barrier have been constructed,’ and ‘no “new wall” [...] has yet been completed’.<sup>2</sup> This lack of progress was in stark contrast to the continued rhetorical salience of ‘the Wall’ to the President’s mode of governing.

The imbalance between the concrete realisation (pun intended) of border security and its prominence in the language of politics points towards the conclusion that border security is, at least in part, a semiotic phenomenon. This is not to downplay the real barriers to movement that occur at the border, nor to suggest that the policing of that border does not inflict real

violence by trapping, deterring, or injuring those seeking to cross. However, it is to suggest that the discursive work of naming the border is crucial if not constitutive of the capacity of the border to mark a boundary. At the same time, it should be argued that the physical construction of the border as a material barrier does important figurative work which makes it hard to distinguish the border-object from its discursive construction.<sup>3</sup> A telling example of this elision might be the building of competing prototype wall designs along the US border near the Otay Mesa Port of Entry in 2017.<sup>4</sup> In 2018, US Customs and Border Protection reported that ‘none of the prototypes tested in 2017 met all of CBP’s operational requirements’ though a contract was issued to one of the bidding companies, Fisher Sand and Gravel, following urgings from the President.<sup>5</sup> This contract has subsequently been subject to a Pentagon investigation and no construction has been possible.<sup>6</sup> The prototypes were demolished in February 2019.<sup>7</sup>

This sorry tale is hardly a new one and is certainly not evidence of the end of globalisation. As Didier Bigo has argued, the logic of securitisation is a paradoxical consequence of globalisation, which involved declining governmental authority over a host of transnational transactions. Consequently, the control of the border became the totemic expression of governmental efficacy and this meshed with commercial interests that were developing new surveillance technologies which promised to restore political control over the permeable trading barriers of the modern global economy.<sup>8</sup> From Bigo’s perspective, the current wave of protectionism was already seeded by the very processes of globalisation and this must raise doubts about a narrative of successive epochs which would suggest national populism has replaced globalisation. Bigo’s insight also highlights the important symbolic work that the prototypes carried out in the absence of genuine construction to fortify the border. The prototype wall sections implied that some form of progress had been made. They spoke of the administration’s intent and signalled research into effective methods of deterrence, implicitly criticising the work of previous administrations and the inferiority of the existing border fencing. Their structures utilised symbolically impermeable materials such as concrete and metal and deployed spiked grating pointing over the Mexican side that harked back to historical forms of battlements.

The power of these prototypes as symbols has clearly been recognised in some quarters of the US. One obvious instance of this is the MAGA Prototypes website that documents an art project which spanned the life of the structures.<sup>9</sup> MAGA identifies itself as a ‘United States-based non-profit art organization,’ and styles the prototypes as a ‘Land Art Exhibition’. While the prototypes were in situ, MAGA organised tours and offered visitors directions to the prototype site so that they could make their own visit. It also hosted a petition to support its campaign to turn the prototypes into ‘a National Monument’, under the 1906 Antiquities Act. Its webpage can be hard to read unambiguously. On the one hand, the organisation’s name feels parodic; ‘make art great again,’ as it declares on its Mission statement, obviously

subverts the President's infamous protectionist slogan, and its commitment to 'celebrate creativity, openness, tolerance, and generosity' feels pointedly opposite to the President's public demeanour. On the other hand, its project to use Federal law to protect the prototypes as art objects of 'significant cultural value' directly references the President's aspiration to 'achieve complete operational control of the southern border'. The desire to see the prototypes become a national monument also neatly encapsulates the work that the border does in constituting the nation as an imagined collective.<sup>10</sup>

One of the striking aspects of the MAGA project is its website-design which utilises a number of dynamic images of the prototypes in keeping with its claim that the prototypes have the status of art. These images present the wall sections as deeply aestheticised objects and encourage visitors to the website to take time to view the prototypes as an 'exhibition'. As such, the MAGA project is part of a substantial tradition of contemporary art that has sought to repurpose the material of the border-object and its technologies of surveillance for the purposes of art. Some of the most immediately recognisable instances of this kind of work are the graffiti painted onto the illegal West Bank wall by the artist Banksy whose images tried to ridicule Israel's security of its border but also challenged the physical solidity of the wall with images that depicted apertures breaking its concrete surface.<sup>11</sup> Banksy's work, however, is not the only art to try to repurpose the West Bank wall: the photographer Raeda Saadeh's depictions of the wall show a woman caught by (*Angel* 2013), preparing to scale (*Going to School* 2013), or to pull down the wall (*One Day*, 2013); while Steve Sabella's *Metamorphosis* (2012) uses photographs of the wall's materials in repeating patterns to suggest not only the injury caused by occupation but also the fragility of the structures of separation.<sup>12</sup> Israel's barrier wall is not the only border that has been treated in this way and visual artists seem repeatedly drawn to challenge the physical projection of authoritarian state power that such barriers involve. For instance, the architects Ronald Rael and Virginia San Fratello have collaborated on a series of artworks, including etchings and snow-globe models, reimagining the US borderwall as forms of recreation including as a volleyball net and as a teeter-totter.<sup>13</sup> In 2019, they briefly transformed the actual wall into a play-park by installing bright pink teeter-totters on the border structure, allowing children on either side of the border to play together.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, video artist Ursula Biemann has repeatedly turned to the border. In works such as *Europlex* (2003) and *Sahara Chronicle* (2007), footage of ordinary workers or would-be migrants is interlaced with images culled from global communication networks which are part of an armoury of surveillance that is deployed along international frontiers.<sup>15</sup> The artist Melanie Jackson's work, *The Undesirables*, also points the viewer towards the technologies of fortification by including video footage of British docks which she radically degraded so that the visual field becomes almost wholly blank. This strategy was required in order to comply with the restrictions imposed upon her when photographing the surveillance architecture used at the border.<sup>16</sup> Art of this kind draws the viewer's attention to the substance of the border rather than

only to its function in order to defamiliarise the logic of securitisation as proof of governance.

That visual art has been effective in figuring the border as an observable object is no surprise. As Mireille Rosello and Stephen F. Wolfe have noted, 'there is no such a thing as a non-aesthetic figuration of the border'. While border securitisation may appear to represent the apogee of function, its 'monumentality' is 'not purely utilitarian' but conspicuously 'designed'.<sup>17</sup> If the appearance of the border is profoundly semiotic it is, perhaps, worth asking why the representation of the border-object, which is so apparent in contemporary art, has been less prominent in the language of fiction within the contemporary novel. Certainly, there has been plenty of interest in migration in contemporary literature and literary criticism; in the area of postcolonial literary studies, for instance, the figure of the migrant has often been made to appear to be the emblematic figure of late modernity. However, this interest in the migrant does not appear to have been matched by a consideration of the border itself. In a classic postcolonial novel like *The Satanic Verses* the border constitutes a problem of representation so that the presentation of the border itself is circumvented by the magical arrival of Gibreel and Saladin on a beach in Hastings having floated out of the sky from an exploding jet plane.<sup>18</sup> The avoidance of the border as such is not atypical in contemporary fiction and for various reasons many novelists have represented migration and migrants with only a minor focus on the border itself. In Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West*, for instance, the border is erased by the central magical device of the mysterious black doorways that act as portals around the world. Hamid has explained that this focus was motivated by a desire to prevent the exceptional journey being used to define migrants and to place attention instead on aspects of their presence which might appear ordinary to the reader.<sup>19</sup> Nonetheless, the effect is the textual erasure of the border as a described object. One reason for this may be that the emblematic migrant has tended to comprise a particular kind of migrant and some critics have complained that the uncritical celebration of elite migration had resulted in a blindness to the range of experiences of the border and the types of violence that crossing involves.<sup>20</sup>

For other critics this absence of the border as a material object has been less problematic because they have tended to theorise the border as an event rather than as a symbolic object. A notable example of this is found in the work of Johan Schimanski, who has sought to identify some kind of correspondence between the geopolitical border (as a discursive construction) and the boundaries between text and reader. Schimanski's account depends upon a version of post-structuralism which infers the border as a kind of textual event: borders are under a constant process of inscription and therefore, it follows, are capable of being read. From here Schimanski endeavours to think about the kind of reading experiences that this might involve and proposes a structural resemblance between the form of narrative and the encounter with the border.<sup>21</sup> One problem with Schimanski's approach is

that the border itself seems to slip out of view. The examples that Schimanski supplies of border crossings tend to focus upon the phenomenological, to describe the experience of the encounter with the border and the feelings that it produces. In his examples the border seems to be an apprehensible reality but one that appears to reside in the affective encounter of the characters rather than as a concrete marker with its own semantic coding. Certainly, the examples that Schimanski uses of modernist and contemporary writing appear to endorse this approach and might signal a more widespread reorientation of fiction away from the materiality of nineteenth-century realism towards an attention to interiority. Nevertheless, given the way that visual art has utilised the material of the border to question the meanings and efficacy of the border-function it seems productive to consider how the border-object has been represented in recent fiction and to consider what this has to say about how such writing contributes to our sense of border securitisation.

### Figuring the Border in Contemporary Fiction

An instance of this kind of representation in contemporary fiction occurs in Abdulrazak Gurnah's novel *By the Sea* (2002). Gurnah's novel revolves around the migration from Zanzibar to the UK of two interrelated characters; the first, Latif Mahmud, enters the UK at the height of the Cold War as a defector from the GDR, and enters the UK relatively smoothly; the second, Saleh Omar a former creditor of Mahmud's family, enters the UK at the start of the twenty-first century and is granted access only by appealing for asylum as a refugee. One of the effects of the novel is to contrast changing UK attitudes towards Tanzanians in the transition from Cold War to globalised geopolitics. The UK has become a less welcoming place, and this is reflected in the way that the border itself is represented. Whereas Mahmud appears to move across frontiers with ease (an ironic reversal of assumptions about the 'Iron Curtain') Omar's entry into the UK is represented as an anxious arrival which requires him to perform his 'refugee-ness' for UK immigration officials.<sup>22</sup> Central to this account is Gurnah's description of Gatwick Airport as a kind of mundane border which masks its authority behind a semiotics of unremarkable bureaucracy.

I walked slowly through what felt like coldly lit and silent empty tunnels, though now on reflection I know I walked past rows of seats and large glass windows, and signs and instructions. Tunnels, the streaming darkness outside lashing with fine rain and the light inside drawing me in. What we know constantly reels us into our ignorance, makes us see the world as if we were still squatting in that shallow tepid pool which we had known since childhood terrors. I walked slowly, surprised at every anxious turn that an instruction awaited to tell me where to go. I walked slowly so that I would not miss a turning or misread a sign, so that I would not attract attention too early by getting into a flutter of confusion. They took me away at the passport desk. 'Passport', the man said,

after I had been standing in front of him for a moment too long, waiting to be found out, to be arrested. His face looked stern, even though the blankness in his eyes was intended to give nothing away. I had been told not to say anything, to pretend I could not speak any English.<sup>23</sup>

This passage seems to readily accord with much of the theory of the border as a textual event. As Angus Cameron notes, airports are curious versions of borders because they are not external to the nation. Although the concept of 'edge boundaries' remains central to the normative form of territory, the transfer of the border to the interior requires an excess of signification as a way of covering over its 'spatial ambiguity'.<sup>24</sup> In Gurnah's account of Omar's approach to the border this signification takes on a conspicuously textual form which comprises a succession of imperatives that serve as both guides and as an implied interdiction. The role of the 'instruction' that funnels Omar toward the passport desk is a readable sign of the border just as the passport itself is a form of textual exchange (a literal text) that facilitates or prohibits passage. The final request for a passport, itself an instruction – 'give me your passport ...', is also a kind of occluded barrier – '... and I will see if it is adequate'. Gurnah's depiction also coincides with Schimanski's account of border crossing as an epistemological journey from the known to the unknown.<sup>25</sup> The border and its strangeness appears to reveal the limits of Omar's experience and to challenge the comfort of his worldview that was shaped in childhood. As such, the prospect of the border crossing involves a kind of rebirth in which fresh, unknown, 'terrors' will rebuild his sense of what is normal or comfortable. However, what is just as apparent is the way that the border itself is capable of disciplining Omar's body, and Gurnah's description draws the reader's attention to Omar's somatic relation to the border technology. Here, textual signing is not only a matter of reading. It is also a matter of being. The body is compelled to act upon the linguistic framing of the border: to walk (slowly) in pre-determined directions, to stand in a designated spot and to offer up the textual evidence of permission.

This interplay reveals how important it is to acknowledge that the border is both a physical object and also an event. Furthermore, it suggests that the event of the border, the act of crossing or of prohibition, is deeply structured by the capacity of the border architecture to name itself through various forms of signification. It is obvious to say that the border cannot be invisible; it must take physical form in order to function as a barrier between territorial spaces. However, for the border to function it cannot simply take the form of a barrier but must also be declarative. At the same time the border cannot only be signified. Though the border must name itself it is required to take physical form in order to do so. Consequently, if the border can be read, as Schimanski, Rosello and Woolf all claim, it is not sufficient to only see its textuality as a form of reading; it is necessary also to think about what vocabulary the border employs and how the forms of its signification are capable of producing affects and meanings in those who might read it. Put another way,

it is necessary to think about how the border-event is shaped by different forms of the border-object.<sup>26</sup>

In pursuit of this aim it is useful to consider different kinds of textual representations of the border-object and to see how the different forms or vocabularies of securitisation imagine different sorts of engagements with the frontier. An example of a border encounter quite different from Saleh Omar's is imagined by Gary Shteyngart in his comic novel *Super Sad True Love Story* (2010). In the futuristic world of this dystopian novel surveillance makes up the everyday texture of people's lives, whether through the form of the *äppäräti* tablets that are the basis of social communication or the credit poles that scan and publicise people's credit rating as they walk down the street.<sup>27</sup> These forms of surveillance are used to constitute an array of borders that predominantly segregate High Net-Worth Individuals from their Low Net-Worth counterparts but which also contain profoundly ethnic or racial connotations. In the US of the novel, Secretary for Defence Rubenstein is an authoritarian populist, whose nationalist slogans promote xenophobia as a path to American recovery. When the US economy collapses and an IMF recovery plan yields authority to foreign powers (notably China and Norway) the infrastructure of New York begins to fray and the segregations between affluent and working-class areas come to take on the form of fortified blockades.<sup>28</sup> This combination suggests, that the border in Shteyngart's novel combines the forms of concrete securitisation and signifying textuality that is characteristic of the border-object. This is neatly encapsulated in an early scene when the protagonist, Lenny Abramov, returns from Italy to the US and he is met by the New York Army National Guard who board the plane as it lands. Even before passport control Lenny is forced to interact with the authoritarian state which demands his *äppäräti* to sample and scan its data as a precursor to the traditional forms of border surveillance. One of the things that this might indicate is that the mobile border is a constraint on citizenship. As Etienne Balibar has noted, the transportation of the border '*into the middle of political space*', transforms our sense of the border as the stable marker of citizenship and rights. The border becomes something that creates 'problems in the heart of civic space' because there is 'a growing gap' between the national shape of the state and the 'transnational' level at which 'private practices and social relations are now organised'.<sup>29</sup> The presence of the border in the middle of the territory (which the airport typifies) presents a particular problem for an authoritarian state which announces its power through its capacity to limit entry by controlling the border. However, Shteyngart's novel also makes another important observation: the instruments of the border proliferate so that the capacities for surveillance that mundanely fill our lives are easily co-opted to serve the border-function. Such an observation is not wholly speculative and recent reports have suggested that European immigration services have utilised smartphone metadata as an instrument of state surveillance that can verify refugees' accounts of their migration.<sup>30</sup>

If these details suggest that Shteyngart presents the border-object as largely dematerialised, as the episode continues, the presentation of the border

makes this conclusion more complex. Once he has disembarked from the airplane Lenny is required to wait in a security shed, passport in hand, to be removed to immigration control. While there, he is approached by a tank from which a soldier emerges and places a large sign that reads:

IT IS FORBIDDEN TO ACKNOWLEDGE THE EXISTENCE OF THIS VEHICLE ("THE OBJECT") UNTIL YOU ARE .5 MILES FROM THE SECURITY PERIMETER OF JOHN F. KENNEDY INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT. BY READING THIS SIGN YOU HAVE DENIED EXISTENCE OF THE OBJECT AND IMPLIED CONSENT.

- AMERICAN RESTORATION AUTHORITY,

SECURITY DIRECTIVE IX-2.11

"TOGETHER WE'LL SURPRISE THE WORLD!"<sup>31</sup>

As with Gurnah's novel, Shteyngart represents the border-object as one that comes into being as a textual event. As in the description of Gatwick airport, the writing that declares the border-function demands that it is read. The sign deploys the mantra of 'deee-ny and *im-ply*' which is used by the novel's Bipartisan Government to disavow its authoritarianism while demanding consent.<sup>32</sup> In this instance it constitutes a double event: it compels an act of reading, which manages to draw attention to the militarised border-securitisation, while simultaneously demanding its erasure or repression. In part this draws upon the contractual aspect of citizenship, but it also highlights that this contract is honoured by force. Significantly, the emphasis of the passage is on the confrontation with the border in the form of a securitised object and it is notable that the act of crossing is forestalled, even if Lenny does later cross. Potentially, one of the important aspects of describing the border-object in fiction may be this shift in focus away from the act of crossing onto other kinds of border-events.

As a final illustration of what this focus on the border-object can achieve I want to consider the different kinds of border depictions in Hari Kunzru's parodic novel *Transmission* (2005). In many ways Kunzru's text is the emblematic global novel and its central plot involves the release of a destructive computer virus that wreaks havoc on a globally integrated immaterial economy. However, its depiction of the border-object seems to marry with the supposedly post-global era of border fortification and, to that degree, highlights some of the problems with this kind of epochal analysis which Bigo's reading of border-securitisation has already raised. Kunzru's novel is filled with accounts of international travel and numerous characters are depicted moving between nations with relative ease. Similarly, the novel is prominently concerned with the ubiquitous movement of signs, whether in the form of globally salient brands or in the form of digital code, including the Leela computer virus that is central to the novel's plot. Understandably, then, the critical reception of the novel has tended to focus upon ideas about mobility

and to read the border chiefly in terms of its discursive significance and as an accumulation of effects rather than a material object. As Lucienne Loh summarises, the readings of the novel have predominantly focussed on its treatment of cosmopolitanism.<sup>33</sup> The novel is normally read as critiquing some vision of cosmopolitan globalisation, especially as it relates to the apparent weightlessness of the contemporary digital economy, and critics have taken a range of positions on how this is achieved. Philip Leonard, for instance, argues that the presentation of the novel's computer virus undoes the certainty of nation-based securitisation because it can slip 'easily and invisibly across geographical space and over national borders'.<sup>34</sup> Alternately, Emily Johansen picks up on the image of the Trojan-horse virus as a metaphor for neoliberal cosmopolitanism which uses 'a positive facade to mask internal destruction'; when the computer virus in *Transmission* exposes the novel's characters to a brutally-efficient deportation system, she contends, this exposes 'the naive idealism' of a discourse of a borderless world and demonstrates that the 'narrative of totally open access [...] paradoxically acts to make borders more concrete, less permeable'.<sup>35</sup> Despite her use of the word 'concrete', however, the border in Johansen's reading remains visible chiefly as a kind of police-action rather than a material object that functions as a barrier against ingress.

These readings are in keeping with the general character of the novel, which tends to constitute the border as a mental construction rather than as an object that needs to be realised. For instance, when Arjun Mehta, the immigrated Indian temp-worker and author of the Leela virus, contemplates escaping from the US police authorities by crossing into Mexico, he struggles to visualise the border regarding it 'only as an abstraction, a thick black line across the earth'.<sup>36</sup> This description neatly encapsulates Angus Cameron's sense of the difficulty of representing the 'zero-magnitude border line' as 'a function of the physical landscape': how or where do we locate an object that has no dimensions?<sup>37</sup> It also forms an example of one of the many textual echoes or mirrors that Kunzru uses to tie together his two main characters. Mehta's counterpart is the British marketing guru, Guy Swift, who encapsulates the privileges of the high-status European worker just as Mehta exemplifies the precarious migrant from the Global South. While bidding to represent the Pan European Border Agency (PEBA) by rebranding the European border as a form of nightclub, Swift declares that:

in the twenty-first century, the border is not just a line on the earth anymore. It's so much more than that. It's about status. It's about opportunity [...] 'the border is everywhere. The border' and this is key, 'is in your mind'.<sup>38</sup>

Superficially, Swift's assertion that the border is no longer a line on the earth appears to invert Mehta's abstract conception of the border as just that. However, like Mehta, Swift sees the border as something other than physical. For him, the border remains an abstraction, existing as an immaterial mental

attitude rather than a set of physical architectures that make this attitude concrete.

In line with his characters' conception of the border, Kunzru normally presents the border as a minimal plot detail: although the novel recounts numerous characters departing or arriving at new locations, it rarely describes a border encounter. When Mehta first leaves India for the US, for instance, the description of the airport is largely composed of family interactions which lack the kind of scenic description that the reader is offered in Gurnah's novel. Passport control functions only as a destination that Mehta hurries towards in order to escape his family; we do not read of his passage through the frontier and a chapter break jumps the narrative forward to his journey on the passenger jet. This concludes with his descent into the US that ends before the plane makes a landing.<sup>39</sup>

Nevertheless, there are a few attempts to figure the border as a physical barrier and these allow the reader to perceive certain patterns to the form of border figuration. One instance of this occurs when Swift is mistaken for an undocumented Albanian criminal and is deported from the EU by an overzealous and authoritarian police-action conducted by PEBA. In this episode, which stretches over several pages and is key to Johansen's reading of the novel, Kunzru tells of Swift's arrest in a Belgian suburb, where he is roughly transported to 'a temporary processing centre [...] in a hangar in Zaventem Airport'. Details of the hangar are described intermittently but, perhaps as a consequence of the impromptu nature of the environment, the border itself is mainly manifest in the form of immigration officers and policemen who interrogate and manhandle Swift before putting him on a deportation plane to Albania.<sup>40</sup> The presence of the border in an airport in a Brussels suburb, well away from the frontiers, invites comparison with the description of the border-object in Gurnah's novel. While these episodes both occur in an airport only Gurnah describes the public-facing architecture which interpolates the visitor, regular and irregular alike. By contrast Kunzru describes a concealed architecture designed solely for the removal of undocumented migrants and intended to segregate the actions of the state from the regular performance of border security. In this sense Kunzru's depiction is closer to Shteyngart's account of the authoritarian state than the mundane border in *By the Sea*. Something similar can be detected in the presentation of the immigration officials across both novels. Where Omar is wary of meeting the immigration official's eye for fear of jeopardising his claim to asylum, in Swift's encounter it is the immigration officer who 'would not meet his eye as he [was] frogmarched out of the room'.<sup>41</sup> Again, this is closer to Shteyngart's novel, in which the militia guard who scans Lenny's data is described as 'missing a face beneath his cap's long green visor'.<sup>42</sup> This difference is potentially revealing. Gurnah attempts to represent the border which is already figured, which functions through its own representation: Kunzru, like Shteyngart, attempts to represent a border which resists representation and which is about efficacy rather than figuration.<sup>43</sup>

As a further comparison it is helpful to consider the other prominent instance where Kunzru attempts to describe the border-object, in this case when Mehta arrives at the US border with Mexico. The chapter that records this crossing begins with an extensive description of the border fortification that makes up the territorial frontier.

The border between the United States and Mexico is one of the most tightly controlled in the world. From Brownsville, Texas, to the California coast it runs for 2,000 miles, monitored by armed patrols equipped with thermal-imaging cameras and remote-movement sensors, portable X-ray devices, GPS optics, and other technologies intended to prevent (or at least minimize) unauthorized crossing of goods, vehicles and people. At San Ysidro, just south of San Diego, twenty-four lanes of traffic tunnel into an artful system of concrete barriers designed to prevent vehicles turning or reversing as their details are checked against databases and trained dogs are encouraged by the handlers to sniff their wheel arches.<sup>44</sup>

The border that Mehta encounters differs from the border-object at Gatwick that Gurnah describes in that it is chiefly instantiated by the architecture of security rather than in the linguistic architecture of signs and directives. It also differs greatly from the Belgian airport of Swift's border, which is chiefly embodied in the actions of the State personnel. The territorial frontier that Mehta encounters exemplifies the edge boundary as the ideal form of border and so it seems revealing that it takes the form of a physical barrier that is largely absent in the other accounts discussed here. Although this description contains fleeting references to the human form this is largely secondary to the technology and physical obstructions which makes up most of this portrayal. Much of this technology, the X-ray devices or GPS optics, seem disembodied and in the case of 'twenty-four lanes of traffic' the architecture itself is the grammatical subject of the border defence. This might signal a difference of purpose. The border-object that Mehta faces is intended to prevent entry whereas Swift encounters the state as it aims to remove migrants after they have entered. However, both functions may well serve a broader 'disciplinary operation' which enables 'the everyday production of migrant "illegality"' and creates the threat of deportability in order to render 'undocumented migrant labor a distinctly disposable commodity'.<sup>45</sup> To that end it is notable that when Swift tries to return to Europe by crossing the Adriatic from Albania to Italy, the border-object appears to take a form that more closely resembles Mehta's experience. Here, Swift's dinghy is met by 'the lights of a custom launch' through which the border agents, who had made up his previous encounter with the border-object, are rendered only as a synecdoche of disembodied technology.<sup>46</sup> When thinking about how the border signifies, the relegation of the human to be replaced by technologies of surveillance seems significant. As in the border wall prototypes displayed in San Diego, the investment in high-technology surveillance at the national

borders undoubtedly involves an element of spectacle in which the visible expression of power functions through its appearance as much as upon its effective exercise. The erasure of the human form as a component of the border-object does work to present the border as disinterested but it is also a way of presenting the border as inhospitable, a barren place that is out of touch with the human scale.

The range of depictions of the border-object that can be found in Kunzru's novel suggests the importance of considering the form that the border takes. If borders are always barriers intent on preventing, or at least checking, movement across territory they achieve this function in varying ways. As Kunzru's novel illustrates this is not simply a distinction between the securitised border and other kinds of frontiers. Securitisation itself takes many forms and this is amplified in the comparison of *Transmission* with the other novels discussed here. As with visual art, the effect of depicting the border-object is to subject the forms of securitisation to scrutiny and to indicate the limits of their discursive practices. If the border-object is capable of being read, its presentation in fiction offers a double act of reading which troubles the meaning that the border-object seeks to project. This differs from visual art to the degree that it does not so readily repurpose the material of border fortification in its textual form, though, given how much this architecture relies upon surveillance technology, such innovations are not impossible to imagine.<sup>47</sup> What is clear, however, is that literary representations can bring into question the logic of securitisation by demanding that the act of reading the border becomes a hermeneutic act.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> During the 1990s the Clinton administration combined robust policing of the border with the construction of stronger barriers which were a physical, if somewhat tokenistic, attempt to limit illegal migration to California (Moorehead, *Human Cargo*, 75). Since then, immigration reform has consistently attempted to construct a workable physical barrier between Mexico and the United States. In 2005 the US Congress passed the Border Protection, Antiterrorism, and Illegal Immigration Control Act intended to make 'physical infrastructure enhancements to prevent unlawful entry by aliens into the United States'. US Congress. House, "Border Protection." In 2006 the Senate likewise passed the Comprehensive Immigration Reform Act which approved funds to 'repair', 'extend' or 'construct' fencing across the border. US Congress. Senate, "Comprehensive."

<sup>2</sup> Rodgers and Bailey, "Trump Wall."

<sup>3</sup> I am using the term *border-object* in an effort to distinguish different aspects of the border as simultaneously a function (of governance and of interdiction), as an event (in the sense of an encounter with the border), and an object that is made up of numerous features of securitisation and of bureaucratic marking.

<sup>4</sup> Steckelberg et al., "Trump's Border Wall Prototypes;" MAGA, "Prototypes."

<sup>5</sup> U.S. Customs and Border Protection, "Border Wall System;" Miroff and Dawsey, "North Dakota Company."

<sup>6</sup> Kanno-Youngs, "Pentagon Investigator."

<sup>7</sup> MAGA.

<sup>8</sup> Bigo, "Security and Immigration."

<sup>9</sup> MAGA, "Prototypes."

<sup>10</sup> MAGA. See the sections of the webpage: "Mission," "Sign Petition" and "News."

<sup>11</sup> "Palestine Unbound."

<sup>12</sup> Snajje and Albert, *Palestinian Landscapes*.

<sup>13</sup> Rael and Fratello, *Teeter-Totter Wall*; Bodinson and Cannon, "Artist Story."

<sup>14</sup> Cascone, "Artists."

<sup>15</sup> Biemann, *Mission Reports*.

- <sup>16</sup> Jackson, *The Undesirables*.
- <sup>17</sup> Rosello and Wolfe, "Introduction," 6, 9.
- <sup>18</sup> Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses*, 129-30.
- <sup>19</sup> Bianculli et al., "From Refugees to Politics;" Hamid, *Exit West*.
- <sup>20</sup> Ahmad, "Politics," 287-89; Cheah, "Given Culture," 172.
- <sup>21</sup> Schimanski, "Reading Borders."
- <sup>22</sup> For a more detailed account of this contrast see Helf, "Imagining Flight."
- <sup>23</sup> Gurnah, *By the Sea*, 5.
- <sup>24</sup> Cameron, "Ground Zero," 419-23.
- <sup>25</sup> Schimanski, 96.
- <sup>26</sup> The objective quality of the border as object is highly nuanced and malleable. For instance, as Ellie Byrne discusses in her paper for this volume, the sea border could be construed as invisible – far at sea and coded into territorial convention. In such a context the border-object emerges as various kinds of surveillance technology or in the form of naval patrols. On the other hand, the sea also naturalises the border which is presented as something that transcends the political as an indelible barrier between territories.
- <sup>27</sup> Willmetts, "Digital Dystopia."
- <sup>28</sup> Shteyngart, *Super Sad*, 255,81.
- <sup>29</sup> Balibar, *We, the People*, 109-10.
- <sup>30</sup> Meaker, "Europe."
- <sup>31</sup> Shteyngart, 41.
- <sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.
- <sup>33</sup> Loh, "Hari Kunzru," 349-50.
- <sup>34</sup> Leonard, "A Revolution in Code," 282.
- <sup>35</sup> Johansen, "Becoming the Virus," 424.
- <sup>36</sup> Kunzru, *Transmission*, 217.
- <sup>37</sup> Cameron, 427.
- <sup>38</sup> Kunzru, 252.
- <sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 32-37.
- <sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 278-84.
- <sup>41</sup> Gurnah, 9.
- <sup>42</sup> Shteyngart, 40.
- <sup>43</sup> In the UK immigration detention and removal services are protected by a number of confidentiality clauses relating to the private contracting of services (McIntyre and Taylor, "Britain's Immigration Detention".) and there have been a number of high-profile whistle-blowing cases reporting on the violations of human rights and legally-mandated standards in UK Immigration Removal Centres (Plomin, *Panorama*). In 2018, Stephen Shaw, the former prison ombudsman, described the number of suicides in IRCs as a 'state secret' (Bulman, "Suicides").
- <sup>44</sup> Kunzru, 266.
- <sup>45</sup> De Genova, "Migrant 'Illegality' and Deportability in Everyday Life," 438.
- <sup>46</sup> Kunzru, 284.
- <sup>47</sup> Something akin to the kind of 'locative writing' that Philip Leonard discusses in his chapter on electronic writing might utilise data from border surveillance to compose a narrative. Though the boundary between the literary and the visual text in these instances raises some definitional questions. Leonard, *Orbital Poetics*, 97-101.

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**Liam Connell** teaches literature at the University of Brighton. He is the author of *Precarious Labour and the Contemporary Novel* (London: Palgrave, 2017) and the editor of *Literature and Globalisation: A Reader* (London: Routledge, 2010). Email: [l.j.connell@brighton.ac.uk](mailto:l.j.connell@brighton.ac.uk)