

RACE WALLS IN DETROIT

VICTORIA HATTAM

In the past, Victoria Hattam has written extensively about the militarized southern border wall of the U.S. settler colony. In Detroit, she encountered other politically-charged walls, which spatially enforced the racial redlining of U.S. cities against its Black residents.

I had heard about it. A race wall in the outskirts of Detroit. The U.S. southern border gone inland?

It is known variously as the 8 Mile Wall, the Birwood Wall, the segregation wall. I call it the "race wall" as it was a materialization of racist mortgage lending practices adopted in the United States at mid-20th-century. Redlining, as the policy is known, involved government officials, banks and real estate offices literally drawing lines on maps to guide bank lending. Race undergirded the whole system: Blackness equaled risk. Federal housing funds flowed unevenly depending on the racial composition of neighborhoods. The 8 Mile Wall — its bricks and mortar — were integral to the race-based mortgage programs. It was built to reassure the Federal Housing Authority (FHA) that white and Black neighborhoods, although proximate, would remain physically separate. Black residents were supposed to live on one side of the wall, and white residents in the new development for whites would reside on the other. In a quite literal sense, then, the 8 Mile Wall is redlining materialized from maps to walls.

Built in 1941, the wall is a half-mile long, six feet high and a foot thick nestled in amongst the houses in a northern neighborhood in Detroit. It is a solid construction, built out of cement blocks with square cement posts designating wall segments every five or six feet. Some parts of the wall are painted off-white; others are left cement grey. In 2006, an artist and Detroit non-profit, painted a brightly colored mural on a section of the wall that runs alongside the Alfonso Wells Memorial Playground. The wall still stands. The Michigan State Historic Preservation Office is trying to have the wall placed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Monies flowed unevenly to adjacent neighborhoods. Live on the Black side of the wall and banks would not lend; live on the other side and monies flowed easily to the new housing development for whites. Race determined whether one had access to capital through the race based mortgage system. The FHA mortgage programs did more than just shape access to housing; it structured long term inequalities in the U.S., because wealth, scholars agree, generally is generated through property rather than work.

The wall is redlining made flesh.

Border Walls ///

Standing next to the 8 Mile Wall, the structure echoes in another direction — to the incumbent U.S. President weaponizing of migration through construction of a "big beautiful wall" along the southern border. From the very beginning of his presidential campaign, the border wall has been Trump's signature issue. Where Ronald Reagan positioned the Republican Party against affirmative action, Trump aimed to reinvigorate right wing political identifications by attacking migrants. Trump is not alone in this move; right wing political parties around the globe have tried to bolster their electoral appeal by opposing immigration. Border walls have become vehicles for right wing mobilization.

To be sure, the 8 Mile and the southern border walls are very different; each embedded within particular geographies and histories. Unlike the southern border, there are no formal security protocols at the 8 Mile Wall: one can walk around it quite easily via public roads located at either end of the structure. Tellingly, in the middle of the wall, in the public park, two large rocks have been stacked one on top of the other to form a makeshift sty to facilitate getting up and over. The Detroit wall serves as a marker rather than a barrier: a demarcation rather than a territorial limit. In some sense, it is an everyday wall; less spectacular than its border counterparts, but no less pernicious. The border wall, by contrast, is getting taller and more highly securitized by the day making passage across the wall increasingly treacherous. The differences notwithstanding, the Detroit and southern border walls echo. The resonances are politically telling.

The race wall's significance reaches beyond redlining. The object itself — its wallness — disrupts the longstanding separation of race and migration politics that has been a hallmark of so called "ethno-racial" politics in the United States.

Reconnecting race and migration in the U.S. is no easy task because considerable political work has gone into holding apart the two social categories. The term "ethnicity"



The 8 Mile Wall, Detroit. / Photos by Victoria Hattam, June 2, 2019.

was introduced in the early 20th century in the U.S. by Jewish activists as a means of distinguishing Jewish peoples from racialized others. Ethnicity was claimed, and ultimately institutionalized, as a different kind of difference to that of race. In 1977, the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) codified the distinction by mandating that all federal departments and agencies collect ethnic and racial data separately. Importantly, the OMB mandate had authority over the decennial census as well, and those data provide the denominator for all federal government policy. In the U.S., in contrast with Europe, many government policies and social practices have distinguished race from ethnicity thereby obscuring the parallels and entanglements linking slavery, imperialism, settler colonialism, and migration. The Detroit wall disrupts that separation and in so doing undermines narratives of American exceptionalism in which ethnic differences have been embraced through claims to cultural pluralism that do not extend to racialized others.

Objects emanate politically — material penumbras if you will. The Detroit wall is no exception. By bringing race and migration into a single visual field, it puts the question: how do the two relate? Political articulations shift as old distinctions are breached.

The challenge is to remain open to the emanations — alert both to extant differences and potential affinities objects afford. Sensing the emanations requires an expansive conception of the political — a multi-sensory politics that extends across objects, images, identifications, and places. The 8 Mile Wall is important in its own right, for its quite particular history of racist mortgage lending, but the wall has a wider reach. It carries with it an intersectional politics that opens possibilities of aligning anti-racist and pro-immigrant politics that resonate powerfully now.

Memory and Forgetting ///

I am not the first to write about the 8 Mile Wall: many have told the story before. In fact, the story has been told over and over in an unusually wide array of media outlets. Teresa Moon, who heads the 8 Mile Community Organization, has been interviewed by Al Jazeera, National Public Radio, and The Detroit News among many other media outlets. On June 14, 2019, the National Park Service awarded the City of Detroit Historic Designation Advisory Board a 40,000 dollar grant to preserve the wall. The press conference announcing the award was

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The 8 Mile Wall,
Detroit. / Photos by
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held at the wall and was covered favorably by the local Fox2 News channel. Six days later, while running for President, Senator Elizabeth Warren announced her housing policy in front of the wall posting a video of the announcement on her twitter feed and being interviewed by *The Detroit News*. That same year, Gerald Van Dusen, an English Professor at Wayne State University, published a comprehensive study of the wall. Almost all the news coverage is accompanied by images drawn from the Library of Congress. The wall is not hidden; it sits in plain sight — recognized by many as an important political object .

Present day racism is enacted through forgetting. The fact that the Detroit wall is not widely known is testimony to the ways in which we refuse to hold onto our history of racial violence and repression. Photographs of the Detroit wall have been shown time and again and the story of redlining told and retold. And yet, both repeatedly slip from view. This history needs to be told yet again; its specificity and reach recounted over and over so as to resist the willful desire for amnesia and repression. Many 8 Mile residents claim the wall in just these terms: as a vehicle for remembering. Teresa Moon, president of the 8 Mile Community Organization, has been asked many times whether the wall should be torn down: “Heck, no!” she replies time and again. The history of racial discrimination needs to be seen and heard. Even if official housing policies have been modified, racism continues. The wall stands as a badge of honor and as material testimony to the long, systematic, and multi-sited history of racial violence and discrimination.

Look, look sideways, remember. ■

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MAPUCHE TACTICS AGAINST THE DRILLERS OF VACA MUERTA

M7RED & ARENA DOCUMENTA

Throughout the Americas, settler colonies not only established nation states on Indigenous lands, they also exploit the depths of the earth’s resources. M7Red and Arena Documenta describe how Mapuche communities are organizing against oil companies in the Vaca Muerta region.

“One of the most polluting companies that had operated in the continent will soon arrive in our territory,” announced a manifesto written by the Mapuche Confederation on the Mapuche new year. An Ecuadorian delegation of the Kofan and Siona peoples had visited Vaca Muerta to warn their brothers and sisters about the terrible damage caused to their territories by the activities of U.S. oil company Chevron in the Amazonian jungle. That night at the ruka of the Lof Campo Maripe a joint decision was reached: two oil drilling rigs will be taken by the community with the cooperation of the Mapuche Confederation and other allied organizations.

Security Forces arrived at Campo Maripe community territory the 16th July 2013 at 6AM with eviction orders. That same day, the agreement between Argentine oil company Yacimientos Petrolíferos Fiscales (YPF) and Chevron would be signed at the provincial legislature. A small group of people of this Mapuche community went to the nearest town and bought lots of bottles of floor cleaning products. “We went to the towers, but first we stopped by the trailers where the oil workers sleep and told them: ‘Don’t worry, nothing’s happening’.” They started filling 5-liter fuel cans with the cleaning product — fuel as far as what the police could tell — and started pailing the tower base with firewood branches. “If you don’t leave right now we set this on fire!”, they warned the police forces. In the meantime, a group of women climbed the tower and chained themselves to the structure. For 48 days, six oil workers teams were stuck and were unable to work.

The Vaca Muerta oilfield formation covers a total area of 30,000 square kilometers (approximately the size of Belgium), most of them in the province of Neuquen in the Argentinian side of north Patagonia. This province is quite new in the process of consolidation of the Argentine territory. Neuquen (Newenken in mapudungun, the mapuche language) was a national territory before it was created as a province by decree in 1955 by Juan Peron, president at the time and military strategist.

This process illustrates the everlasting tensions between exploitation of natural resources, Mapuche land claims

and cultural heritage, the Argentine federalist system and the role of state-owned companies in the incorporation of Patagonia territory, a disputed territory in the 19th century between the newborn countries of Argentina and Chile. In fact, the conquest of Patagonia by these two nation states ended only through the accomplishment of infamous military expeditions: the “Conquista del desierto” in Argentina (1879-81), and the “Ocupación de la Araucanía” in Chile (1861-83). Both nation states advanced over Mapuche ancestral territory, which in scientific and military cartography appeared as “terra nullius” — an uncharted territory. This apparently uninhabited land was known as the “Wall Mapu” or ancestral territory of the Mapuches.

The Wall Mapu is represented as a map that covers territories in both countries. It was seen flaming in every protest and rally along with the Mapuche flag during the recent revolts in Chile and became a symbol of popular resistance, although is not officially recognized in any national cartography. The Wall Mapu is simultaneously a historical reconstruction and a vision towards the future.

In 1918 the first oil field was discovered in Plaza Huincul, one of the beginnings of the Argentine oil industry. Together with the building of massive hydro dams, this brought development and jobs to the region and made the province a strategic asset and geopolitical stake of a modern nation state in the south cone. The presence of oil and gas industries in the province, recreated demographic dynamics seen in other drilling areas around the world. Many of the exploration camps later became towns where most of the employment relied on state-run companies and hence the necessity for strong unions. Neuquen province has been governed since its beginnings by a provincial party the MPN (Movimiento Popular Neuquino) started by local politicians and oil union leaders focused on the management of its rich subsoil. Its resources were owned by the province but exploited by state and private oil and gas companies. The national constitution declares that all revenues from natural resources belong first to provinces and then to the nation state.