The Museum as a Space of Radical Imagination: Dismantling and Rebuilding Political Worlds

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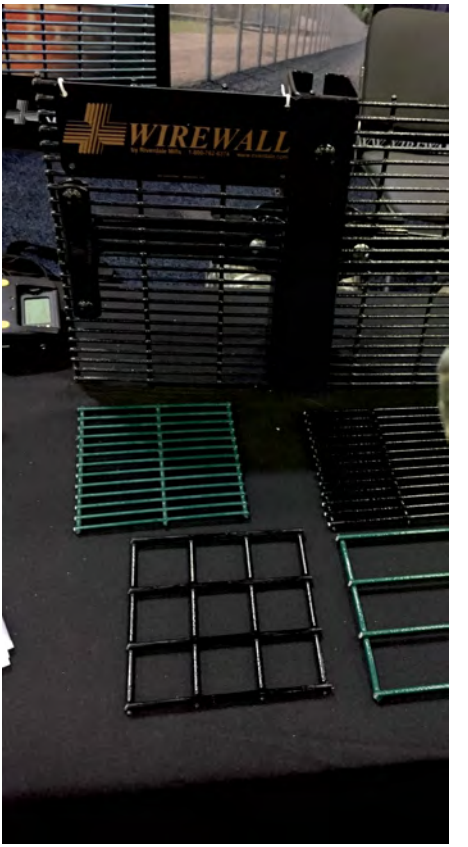
How might we create an ethnographic museum in which the histories and afterlives of racist and colonial violence become visible, and conversations about them become possible?

To begin this experiment, I propose to add an object called 'wirewall' to this anti-racist, anti-colonial ethnographic museum, as a way to render visible forms of oppression and violence (see fig. 1). We might say it is in the same category of objects already in the National Museum for Ethnology, in Leiden: for instance, we can liken it to the effigies made by the Sorongo, in the region of northwest Angola. These served several purposes, but one of them was to demarcate land boundaries. Dating from the eighteenth to the early twentieth century, they were used to mark the crossroads between two areas. There are several kinds of effigies; for instance, there is one with a traditional male leopard cape, associated with vigour and power (see fig. 2). But there is also a figure of a mother and child, which, among other things, represents the source of life and the continuity of the clan. How are these similar to wirewall? It also marks land boundaries; it was designed to protect the border between two nation-states – the US and Mexico. But it does not represent life; it enacts a regime of death. We might be tempted to say it is a part of American culture. But it is more accurate to say that it is part of a global culture of incarceration. What might wirewall tell us about racism and colonial violence? How might it work in an ethnographic museum?

Fig. 1: Wirewall: proposed technology for the US-Mexico border wall. Photo: Miriam Ticktin.



In what follows, I will suggest, first, that in order to see empire and racism, an ethnographic museum needs to shift the units of analysis – rather than just regions, tribes or cultures, we need to think of transnational formations. Colonialism travelled in ways that were not geographically contiguous; and racial capitalism travels today in constantly shifting global patterns and forms. The museum could be organized differently, by naming and following the traces of these political formations, such as cultures of incarceration, plantation afterlife, and so on. Second, I will suggest that one way to see them – to render visible these formations of violence – is to look at objects that help make up and reproduce everyday life. They may have no obvious artistic, ritual, or social meaning. Instead, they may be technical or infrastructural. I look at these infrastructures as enabling our common sense; indeed, as embodiments of our current political imaginations, precisely without calling atten-

tion to them. Third, I will suggest that to render visible forms of violence is to admit to our implication in them – and this in turn requires a form of care and responsibility to imagine different futures. This process of imagination should have a place in the museum, too.

Fig. 2: Effigy as Boundary Marker: Sorongo, Central Africa, before 1884. Collection Nationaal Museum Van Wereldculturen, Coll.nr. RV-445-15.

Infrastructures of Carceral Worlds

First, then, what does wirewall reveal about a particular global carceral cultural context? Wirewall is one of the technologies used to build a prototype of a border wall. It was among the finalists for the border wall that former President Trump wanted to build at the US–Mexico border. In 2017, Trump created a competition for border wall designs, and six prototypes were erected in the desert near San Diego, alongside the existing border fence. Locals made fun of him, suggesting it was ridiculous to spend billions of dollars trying to stop people from crossing; people will always cross, they said, and indeed, this is true. At the border wall in Brownsville, Texas, I could see fingerprints along the metal beams, the traces left by the many who had scaled it. Anyone who walks by can see the ladders on the ground beside the wall, along with ropes and other paraphernalia; border patrol officers said they clear them away every day. The border patrol officers (CBP or Customs and Border Patrol) admitted to us[1] that walls are simply 'tactical infrastructures': the goal is for them to simply slow people down, so they can be caught *after* they cross. Indeed, we found that CBP use a measurement called the 'border calculus' – an algorithm that anticipates how quickly someone will disappear after they scale the wall.

So what work does this technology perform in relation to this larger context of incarceration? Border walls and their prototypes manufacture and evoke a political imaginary about the world. In this case, it's about invasion. For instance, in June 2018, Trump tweeted about those trying to cross the southern border of the US: 'We cannot allow all of these people to invade our Country. When somebody comes in, we must immediately, with no Judges or Court Cases, bring them back from where they came.' He repeated this language of invasion over and over; for instance, when in 2019 a peaceful migrant caravan was moving from Mexico toward the US border, he stated, 'It's like an invasion. They have violently overrun the Mexican border'.[2]

As speculative designers Dunne and Raby[3] state, politics is a battle over the imagination, where the imagination can help us maintain pre-existing realities, or create alternative visions, denaturalizing the 'real'. In this case, the imagination both produces, and is produced by, infrastructure and design. Trump's political vision of a white supremacist United States was crystallized by border wall infrastructures, not simply by law. That is, material designs and technologies have helped to manufacture the very idea of invasion.

1 I conducted collaborative research at the US-Mexico border wall with the Multiple Mobilities Working Group, <https://www.multiplemobilities.org/>, accessed 29 March 2023.

2 <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2019/08/trump-immigrant-invasion-language-origins/595579/>, accessed 29 March 2023.

3 Dunne and Raby 2018.

If we investigate the wirewall technology, we learn more about the imaginary that it embeds. As many scholars have argued, artefacts always have a politics.[4] The border wall is a transnational formation; the structures, materials and smart border technologies are transnational. They are based on a political economy of militarism and invasion. Global security technology is a global industry[5], even as, paradoxically, it circulates in the name of national closure. Wirewall illustrates the global spread of this regime of carcerality, where worlds are built on enclosures, containment, and caging, privileging the rich over the poor, the haves over the have-nots. Indeed, the biggest predictor of who constructs the walls and where they do so is the wealth gap between the nation-state constructing the barrier and the place and population defined as a threat.[6]

But there is more to the political imagination embedded in this technology. In an interview with the designer, I learned that his 'wirewall' technology was initially developed to trap lobsters and crabs, then it served to keep fish in pens, and finally, to cage chickens. With its special PVC coating initially designed for the sea, it could withstand extreme environments and temperatures, while maintaining visibility through the fence. It was now being proposed for humans. In other words, wirewall technology materializes a form of life based on divisiveness and separation. Once again, this is in contrast to the Central African effigies that mark borderlands with symbols of life.

More specifically, wirewall works by way of techniques of dehumanization. These include animality and racialization. The 'human' as a conceptual category is not something natural or biologically fixed, but rather, it is the work of a constantly changing project of taxonomy. A metric of animality is used to exclude people from the category of humanity; but this in turn cannot be separated from race and racial classification, which orders bodies according to how animal they are.[7] This taxonomic slippage has a longer history in the US, but as we can see with this technology, it is being solidified into material infrastructures in new ways. Wirewall treats certain people – here, immigrants, who are already racialized – like crabs, lobsters, or chickens to be caged, and ultimately, slaughtered. Wirewall shows our global carceral culture, one which relies on imagining others – both racialized Others and non-humans – as fundamentally threatening.

4 Winner 1980; Appadurai 1986; Bennett 2010.

5 Ticktin 2022; Miller 2015.

6 Aizeki et al., 2021, 39.

7 Kim 2015.

Fig. 3: Barbed wire fence at Ceuta, marking the border between Spain and Morocco. Photo: Miriam Ticktin.

This kind of transfer of technology from non-human to human, not only likening people to animals but treating them as such, is already built into the history of other caging technologies, like barbed wire. Indeed, I would suggest that barbed wire be placed beside wirewall in the museum, to illustrate the development of infrastructures of racism and violence, and to show variations in similar technologies. Just as the Sorongo effigies took various forms, so do technologies of racism. Barbed wire was initially developed to control and enclose cattle by inflicting pain on them in the American West during the period of colonization. From there, it was transformed into the primary technology of controlling space for people – enabling the concen-

tration camps used during the Nazi regime, and in the Russian Gulag.[8] It continues to this day as a key tool to contain human beings in an ever-growing carceral world (see fig. 3). If we look, we can find other similar caging technologies in the museum, designed to catch animals and birds; were these carceral technologies ever used for humans? What elements of their technologies might travel across species-boundaries, enabling a different set of carceral practices? (see fig. 4).

Fig. 4: Bird cage made from bamboo by prisoners in Putla, Mexico, to be sold to tourists, before 1977. Collection Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen, Coll.nr. TM-4324-55.

In terms of migration, this transfer of technology from non-human to human first happened in the US at the Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument, where, perhaps not accidentally, Trump kick-started his incarnation of the wall in the last months of his presidency, with a thirty mile long, thirty foot tall steel fence that has upended a portion of the landscape, its ecologies and its water sources. In fact, the US-Mexican border wall was initiated in Monument Park in 1949 with the justification of keeping out contaminated, 'Mexican' livestock infected with hoof and mouth

8 Netz 2004; Barder 2015.

disease, but it quickly morphed into and built on a desire to keep out Mexican people.[9] Indeed, this is just one instance of practices of quarantine – as practices of containment not unlike bordering – shifting from microbes and animals to people. Immigrants are regularly compared to other invasive entities like pests and swarms. And in fact, the language of 'invasive others' is used in overlapping ways for insects, pathogens, plants, and even ideas with varying results: calling plants or animals 'invasive' justifies extermination, to protect the 'natives'.[10] We can see this same response being invoked to deal with invasive humans. Trump's words in reference to immigrants are once again revealing: 'these aren't people, they are animals, and we are taking them out of the country at a level and a rate that has never happened before'.[11] When migrants are likened to forms of parasitic, pathogenic or insect life, capable of infection and contamination,[12] there are mandated responses, first and foremost of which is cleansing or elimination.

This is one way to live in the world, where people wall themselves off from others, trying to privilege a few at the expense of the many. This exploits and ignores the billions of life forms with which we share the planet: animal, microbial, mineral, vegetable.[13] If we dig into the materiality of the technology, wirewall renders visible the racist and colonial violence of the present. Indeed, wirewall also evokes the imaginary that undergirds the ethnographic museum itself, which was founded on the logic of capture and enclosure of objects that were once a part of lively worlds. This worked to create the very notion of Otherness and enforce a feeling of superiority in those who attended museums. The most explicit example of this colonial and racist violence, of course, was the capture and imprisonment of humans, to be shown in museums. Domination, in other words, was the grounding logic of the museum. Museums continue to hold onto human remains, particularly of those from their colonial conquests; promises of restitution have not been honoured.[14] In this sense, it is all the more urgent for the museum to help undo its own foundational violence.

9 Piekielek 2016.

10 Ticktin 2017.

11 <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/16/us/politics/trump-undocumented-immigrants-animals.html>.

12 O'Brien 2003.

13 Mani 2022.

14 <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/10/17/world/europe/france-algeria-restitution-skulls.html?fbclid=IwAR1fm6axfL1bJGB7sPoBJFSRFlcyZVVZuywbw-kcosonT8FZhaILqKKHoMk>, accessed 29 March 2023.

Imagining Otherwise: Biomia

If wirewall technology reveals the ways in which people live in fear of others, and simultaneously as if they can and must dominate other humans and non-humans, then the next and critical step in a new ethnographic museum would be to ask how we might live together otherwise.

That is, to render visible ongoing forms of racist violence is to also admit to our implication in them – and this in turn requires forms of collective responsibility. We all live in the wake of violent histories, we are all shaped by them, even if we are differently situated in relation to them. What networks are we each implicated in, what activities do we participate in, even indirectly, that perpetuate the system? Michael Rothberg lays out the concept of implication, explaining that, 'implicated subjects occupy positions aligned with power and privilege without being themselves direct agents of harm'.[15] In the US, white people are implicated in a system of racial hierarchy; and they all benefit from a lack of racial justice. This is true even if one fights against this system and disavows it – one is nevertheless implicated. But if one is an immigrant, one also enters into and participates in the carceral system, even if the ways in which one is positioned and implicated differ – an immigrant from Cambodia to the US must consider their relations not just to white people, or those with class power, but other people of colour: Black, Indigenous and LatinX communities, along with other Asian communities. Implication can shape how one acts to change the system, but there is no position of neutrality or innocence. If we are trying to create a museum that renders visible racist and colonial violence, it must create space for people to take collective responsibility, and as part of this, to collaboratively imagine other, better, more caring worlds.

How do we do this? How do we produce a different set of political imaginations, new visions about how we might live and be together? I propose that we think of imagination as a practice of care, as a method of and for an alternative politics and form of collective responsibility. These can be alternatives that are not connected by straight lines to futures or pasts; they can be alternative modes of thinking and inhabiting the earth.

When I speak of care, I do not mean dominant liberal forms of political care such as welfare or humanitarianism, but rather, reworked versions of care where it is at once an affective state, a form of practice, and an ethicopolitical obligation. While located in the mundane and everyday, in this triptych form, care may actually have a different revolutionary, transformative potential.[16] Increasingly, scholars, anti-racist activists, and Black and transnational feminists are reclaiming its power, in more speculative forms. Care is central to the Movement for Black Lives

15 Rothberg 2019, 1.

16 Tronto 1993, Puig de la Bellacasa 2017, Martin, Myers, and Viseu 2015, Stevenson 2014.

(MBL), in a form called 'structural care'[17], which is about healing social ills through social action, based on a vision of everyone as interdependent; it is also central to many no-borders movements. For instance, one of the activists engaged in sanctuary work – which I see as part of a larger network of no-borders movements – stated that she thought of the project of sanctuary as the 'embodied, collective action of care', where care is about spurring the imagination, and 'training for the not-yet'. Stated otherwise, care is one of the methods used to imagine, prefigure, and enact alternative ways of being together and recognizing our interrelatedness in a fundamentally non-exclusionary, non-innocent, and non-sentimental manner.[18]

Thinking with care, then, how might we rethink forms of being, in relation to the political imagination embodied by wirewall? How might we do this in the museum? I want to mention one collaborative experiment I engaged in to reimagine borders and togetherness, in the spirit of creating space for other forms of imagination in this new museum. In thinking and talking about how we might be attuned to each other and the world, rather than walling ourselves off, the group I was working with decided to draw on the microbiome as a site from which to imagine a world to be: a near-future world, not a utopic one, which we called 'Biomia'. The microbiome is the study of microorganisms and microbial communities that we harbour in our gut, and that actually maintain us as humans. We used to think that we had a self-enclosed biology; that humans were made up of uniquely human cells, which in turn determine and define us. But in fact, microbiome science has shown that the human is not a unitary entity but a dynamic and interactive community of human and microbial cells. A full half of 'our' cells, it seems, are microbial. And these microbial communities are shared across human bodies. That is, our microbiomes are not fully individualized, but shaped by our local environments, making the boundaries of each of our bodies more ambiguous. I could be biologically very similar to someone who grew up down the street. Microbial communities are active in ways that have not properly captured our attention. After all, these shape who we are, inform the decisions we make, what we desire, how we feel. The brain functions that underpin our personality and cognition are moulded by the microbiome.[19] The 'self' is a product of complex social interactions between human cells and a multitude of microbial cells.

In this sense, it behoves us to care about us/them; to learn to feel them/us. It requires the cultivation of a very different sensorium, attentive to 'gut feelings' at a whole new level. If, as Rancière[20] states, politics is about reconfiguring the fabric of

17 Woodly 2022.

18 See Ticktin 2021a&b.

19 Rees, Bosch & Douglas 2018.

20 Rancière 2010.

sensory experience, then this is an essential political act. If we follow this new imaginary, we understand that no system of control can master the borders of our bodies as we are always changing with our environments. More specifically, we are not separate from, but a part of, our environments. As Julie Livingston[21] so aptly notes, the body is a tentacular relationship, where the air we breathe and exhale eventually gets inhaled by someone else, somewhere else; where the water that goes through our bodies to keep us alive may next nourish a farmer's field.

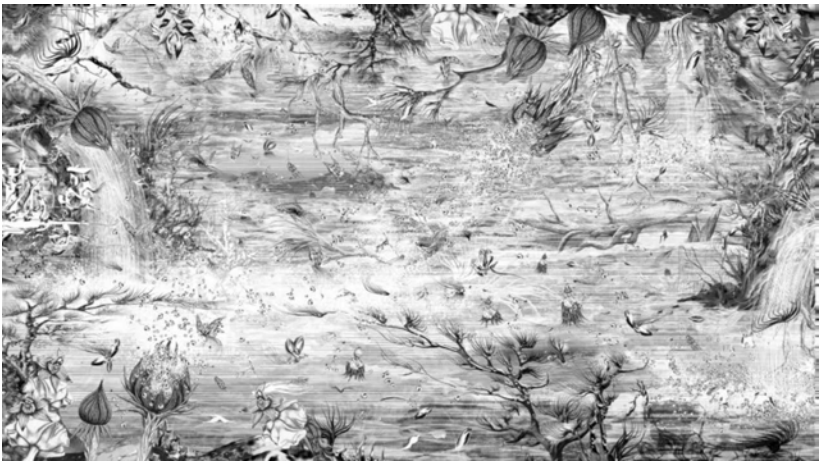
In a series of workshops on what became *Biomia*[22] we used the theory of the microbiome to help imagine different ways of being together that are not contingent upon borders, closure, identities, or fixity (see fig. 5). We replaced the concept of citizenship with an interconnected freedom to hover, to land, or to remain in movement. This was a way of thinking about how to be in the world and allow people to thrive and flourish, according to and acknowledging the fact that they are part of larger, multi-species relationships – are people at ease, do they feel like they can flourish, do they feel good in their gut ultimately? This is metaphorical, but also physical. It is a way to understand and allow for choices about where to be and live, without falling back on developing borders or fixed identity criteria for membership – each 'person' (as a set of ecologies!) decides where they want to be as part of their larger multi-species ecological reality. And this reality is constantly changing depending on who/what is there, and who/what is a part of it. Could we use this to expand our political or moral grammars? If tolerance, benevolence, sympathy, and pity dominate the affective regime of the liberal and modern era, what would the lens of the microbiome bring to our affective and social vocabularies? Would we seek to be parasitic, symbiotic, infected? Contaminated by joy? The moral valences of each would need to be reconsidered. Indigestion could be a way to explain not a physical state, but a dis-ease with a political or social situation. Would we aim for uncertainty and discomfort, which might better reflect an attunement to the world? Would equilibrium be a fleeting state of pleasure, gradually replaced by an appreciation of disequilibrium, when our political subjectivities are remade?

This imaginary does not propose a territory of belonging, but a state of constant becoming; a commitment to exploring and embracing the liveliness of the world, knowing that liveliness also always involves risk and possible violence. I would hope a new, anti-racist and anti-colonial ethnographic museum could cultivate a caring sensibility for all walks of life – risks and all. And as it traces the aftermath of racist violence, I would hope it would also offer the space to collectively imagine otherwise.

21 Livingston 2020.

22 These were hosted at the design space A/D/O in Brooklyn and run by Fiona Raby and Anthony Dunne.

Fig. 5: Biomia. Illustration by Kyung-Me and David Linchen.



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