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#### **The Walls That Hurt Us**

By Marcello Di Cintio

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New coils of razor wire top the fence around Melilla, one of two Spanish territories on North Africa's Mediterranean coast. Along with Ceuta, the enclaves share the European Union's only land borders with Africa and are targets for would-be migrants desperate to reach Europe. Spain has long maintained high-tech fencing systems around the enclaves in an attempt to keep the migrants out, but they had removed barbed wire from the top of Melilla's fence in 2007 after it inflicted serious injuries on those who dared to climb over.

Last November, though, in response to an increase of migrant assaults on the fence, the Spanish authorities restored the wire. The move angered human rights activists and religious leaders across Europe. In a letter to the Spanish interior minister, Bishop Santiago Agrelo Martinez wrote: "Barbed wire with blades on fences in Ceuta and Melilla is an attack on the physical integrity of immigrants: those blades cut, injure, [and] maim ... " The bishop appreciated the Spanish government's responsibility to secure the nation's borders, but he laid bare the fact that the "blades cause only pain and death."

The reinforcement of the fence around Melilla echoes the current building boom of border walls. According to Reece Jones, a University of Hawaii geographer, nearly 30 new border barriers have risen worldwide since 1998. There are new fences on America's border with Mexico and along Greece's border with Turkey. India erected barriers on its frontiers with both Pakistan and Bangladesh. Israel built a wall around Palestine and recently completed a fence along its Egyptian border.

Through technology, barriers to trade, travel and communication keep falling, and yet our world has never been more physically divided by the geometries of bricks, barbed wire and steel.

The political and economic ramifications of the walls are oft-discussed and well understood. So, too, is the psychological trauma suffered by those living in the shadow of the walls. In 1973, an East German psychiatrist even coined a term for the disorder: Mauerkrankheit, or Wall Disease.

Barbed wire spins cruel calligraphy along the United States-Mexico frontier, but crossers have more to fear than just the violence of the barbs. Doctors at the University of Arizona Medical Center treat about 40 migrants each year for broken bones and spinal injuries suffered from falls off the border walls.

There are bullet wounds, too. According to a 2013 investigation by The Arizona Republic newspaper, American border patrol agents have killed 42 people since 2005. Some, like the teenager José Antonio Elena Rodríguez, were killed on the south side of the border by American agents shooting through the wall into Mexico.

Even when the walls don't cause the body pain, they demand, at least, some brief physical humiliation.

In 1876, a barbed wire salesman, John Gates, enclosed a few head of ferocious bulls within a barbed wire pen in San Antonio's central plaza. Reviel Netz writes about the scene in his book "Barbed Wire: An Ecology of Modernity." Mr. Gates deliberately provoked the longhorns who then charged the fence, only to be repulsed by the barbs that tore into their flesh. "Their wounds exacerbate their rage," Mr. Netz writes. The bulls continued to throw themselves against the wire until their agony led to an instinctive withdrawal and resignation. Finally, they stopped trying to breach the fence.

The bloody spectacle proved that through the application of pain, even the fiercest beast can learn to respect a border. "Our skins," Mr. Netz writes, "just a little beneath the surface, are endowed with special nerves activated by pressure rising above rather low thresholds. You can use those nerves against us. By cutting through the boundary of our skins, you can act to protect the boundaries of your property, your prison, your border."

This is also what our walls do. They exploit our bodies' low threshold for pain. Beneath the high-minded ideals of security and sovereignty lies the grim truth that we've designed the walls to hurt people. We opt to control movement across sensitive geography by inflicting agony upon the flesh. We need to confront the inhumanity of how we choose to defend our lines and, like Bishop Santiago, see the barbarism in the barbed wire we uncoil.

Marcello Di Cintio is the author, most recently, of *Walls: Travels Along the Barricades*.