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Cross-Border Data

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Like borders, bodies are sites of continuous data mining.

A body represented as a dataset can be assigned metadata tags, indexed by the nation-state, and subjected to regulatory protocols.

Boundless Informant is instructive in this regard. It was revealed in 2013 as a tool used by the NSA to visualize global surveillance data. Or, to tell U.S. intelligence agencies how much they "know" about the world, and where—around *whom*—that knowledge is geospatially concentrated. The project's global heatmap assigns a color value to each nation. Green denotes "least subjected to surveillance," red indicates most surveilled.[1] Internal military documents show that its function is to answer the question: "What type of coverage do we have on country X?"[2]
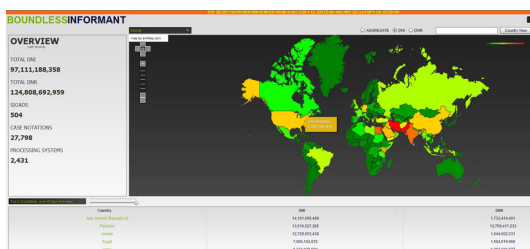
Boundless Informant Heat Map

Here, intelligence data explicitly translate into delineated borders. In a widely circulated snapshot from 2013—before the election of President Hassan Rouhani and the signing of the Joint Plan of Action—Iran emerges as the country where the highest volume of intelligence data was extracted. It accounts for 14 billion of the 97 billion total data points collected by Boundless Informant. In the chromatic schema of the heatmap, it is the reddest place on earth.

The flattening of the globe into RGB color values digitizes longstanding practices with roots in colonial cartography. Boundless Informant's map compresses Iran and its peoples into a hexadecimal color code (roughly #FF0000), embedded in a spatial imaginary that renders them as navigable data points. Its aim is to arrange the world as an object of knowledge surveyed from aloft, from the bird's-eye view of the white, Western subject.[3]

Spring 2020

The preceding paragraphs were meant as a preface to a text on the artist Gelare Khoshgozaran's piece Medina Wasl: Connecting Town *(2018), discussed below. In the intervening months between the time of writing and the time of publication, the U.S. launched a drone strike killing Iranian General Qassem Soleimani as part of a "maximum pressure" campaign against Iran. At the same time, Covid-19 began making its way through 200-plus countries and territories, with over two million cases reported worldwide as of mid-April 2020. Iran has been among the nations most severely impacted. Its capacity to respond to the outbreak is constrained by the ongoing economic crisis constituted by sanctions, an under-resourced*

healthcare system, and border closures imposed by neighboring countries.

As the virus has multiplied, so too have geospatial visualizations that track its movements and growth. In recent months, Iran's geospatial data have been highlighted again in widely circulating world maps that trace the trajectory of the pandemic across the globe, showing where Covid-19 is most widespread. As of this writing, Iran has the ninth-highest concentration of cases, totaling roughly 82,200. It regularly appears rendered in a deep cobalt blue or a bright maroon in the "coronavirus hot spot" maps updated daily across various media outlets.

In Epidemics and Society, *medical historian Frank Snowden writes that "we are inescapably part of a global world in which microbes ... refuse to recognize political borders."[4] This seems to be one of the many ways in which microbial agents are smarter than we are: their movements expose the fictive nature of the borders drawn by human cartographers. Nevertheless, our response to these microbial actors has been to fortify borders to guard against the entry of foreign entities regarded as avatars of an "invisible war."*

Khoshgozaran observes that:

"Historically, virus and illness have been racialized, and conceived as coming from 'elsewhere.' Even before this pandemic, infectious diseases have been associated with the foreigner, the poor, and the queer, even though the facts of history have been that the invader or the colonizer has been the carrier of disease—thinking about European colonizers and Indigenous peoples. With the beginning of the pandemic, it was similar—attributing an ethnicity or a nationality to the virus."[5]

While the virus is novel, the logics governing state response are embedded in a conceptual lineage that reaches much further back. Response strategies replicate what philosopher and curator Paul B. Preciado calls the "immunitary ethos that defines current border regimes," with the body designated as the "new territory where the violent border politics that we have been designing and testing for years on 'others' are now expressed."[6]

In the U.S., popular discourse has routinely conflated COVID-19's nonhuman viral agents with racialized others who threaten the immunological safety of the nation—a threat that must be identified, made known, and guarded against through securitization and the fortification of borders.

Fall 2019

The theorist Jasbir Puar reminds us that in the logics of U.S. homonationalism, the racially marked, Orientalized body is "one that only the exceptional capacities of U.S. intelligence and security systems can quell."[7] To do so requires the "cataloging of unknowables"—the translation of racialized others into repositories of information over which mastery can be exerted.[8] Borders are among the sites where that cataloging takes place, where the "unknowable" is produced and regulated.

A border is also a site where "unknowable" bodies are processed as data by state and military actors. It operates as a zone of encounter with biometric surveillance, satellite imaging, facial recognition checkpoints, and increasingly sophisticated instruments of informatic control. A 2019 report from the Electronic Frontier Foundation reaffirmed that communities at the U.S.-Mexico border constitute "a region beset by surveillance," cataloging "225 data points marking surveillance by local, state, and federal

agencies."[9] Addressing these developments, the Latinx and Chicanx organizing hub Mijente describes a technologized "frontier of surveillance, a surveillance apparatus where algorithms are trained to implement racist and xenophobic policies."[10] Today, a border might comprise a "virtual wall" of solar sentry towers, aerial carbon-fiber drones, and autonomous perimeter systems that use machine learning tools to gather ever greater caches of information.[11]

On the subject of border crossings, Gelare Khoshgozaran writes incisively, "Oil can cross borders; refugees cannot."[12]

To this we might add: *Data can cross borders, refugees cannot.*

Monitored borders mark the landscape of Khoshgozaran's *Medina Wasl: Connecting Town* (2018). In this film transferred to video, digital cartographies flicker across the screen alongside semi-transparent bodies, each dissolving into a pixelated field of unknowability. Khoshgozaran is an interdisciplinary artist who relocated to from Iran to Los Angeles for an MFA program in 2009, and has not been able to return for a decade. In the intervening years, her body of work has articulated queer, feminist diasporic experiences of dwelling in displacement—from the spatial disorientation of *A Petrorhetorical Question*, a crossword installed at ground-level and reading "Middle of what? East of where?" (2017) to the technologies of border security détourned in the exhibition *Likely Mine* (2020). In *Medina Wasl*, Khoshgozaran sketches the affective contours of an environment where

belonging, as Puar puts it, hinges on the "segregation and disqualification of racial and sexual others from the national imaginary."[13]

Khoshgozaran's output is oriented around practice-as-research. Correspondingly, *Medina Wasl* represents not only an arresting moving image work, but a major contribution to border studies. It offers a video tour of a military training site in the California called Medina Wasl—designed to serve as a double for "Middle Eastern" villages—at the same time that it presents visual lessons in the legacies of colonial violence and Orientalism. For Khoshgozaran, the prohibition on border crossings extends to parcels she has attempted to ship to Iran, parcels refused because of export control regulations and embargo classifications.[14] On this subject, she writes:

> The movement of objects and the mobility of people over man made borders are entangled in a web of control which makes the relationship between the two more complicated than they may seem at first glance ... The same colonial logic that enforces international laws and sanctions to restrict the mobility of people and objects from oil rich countries in the Global South precipitates the extraction of resources from underground ... [T]he need for migration is met with violent oppression, criminalization, and closed borders.[15]

The origins of the *Medina Wasl* project lie in Khoshgozaran's discovery that the California Mojave Desert is host to an eponymous "network of 12 virtual Iraqi villages,"[16] erected at Fort Irwin after the invasion of Afghanistan.

Gelare Khoshgozaran, *Medina Wasl: Connecting Town*, 2018, digital video still. Courtesy of the artist.

It teaches U.S. soldiers how to extract data and local knowledge, training them to battle insurgents abroad. In "a marriage of military technology and Hollywood fakery," Arab-Americans from local communities join professional actors to stage training exercises against the backdrop of Orientalist scenery, lending the patina of "authenticity" to a staggeringly mediated simulation.[17] The area is known simply as "the [Sand]Box," collapsing discrete nations and geospatial coordinates into a homogenized field of alterity.[18]

Gelare Khoshgozaran, *Medina Wasl: Connecting Town*, 2018, digital video still. Courtesy of the artist.

Though it also functions as a site for tourism and public entertainment, the

borders of Fort Irwin are heavily monitored. Its automated systems require visitors to submit state documents in advance.[19] In an accompanying essay, Khoshgozaran asks: "What bodies may gain access, passing the military's clearance, to enter an army base for an art project?"[20] It is, as she terms it, "terrorientalist" terrain.[21]

Gelare Khoshgozaran, *Medina Wasl: Connecting Town*, 2018, digital video still. Courtesy of the artist.

Medina Wasl subjects Fort Irwin's simulacra to a range of postproduction techniques. Khoshgozaran layers electronic mapping interfaces over celluloid footage of Fort Irwin, generating a digital palimpsest. In the process, she reveals the mediations, densely woven distortions, and geopolitical fictions at work in the historical production of the "Middle East"—a classification invented by agents of the British India Office.[22]

To prepare for the project, Khoshgozaran conducted interviews with U.S. veterans formerly deployed in the region, then she tasked actors with reciting these transcripts. Their voice-over commentary opens the film. It provides a soundscape of speech acts that evacuate the terrain they describe of any cultural value. "You could

see the landscape. It was nothing but sand. ... it was nothing but dirt and sand." "There is nothing but dirt, dust, and sand." "Nothing but dead land ... nothing." "It reminded me of *Aladdin*." Here, as in Said's formulation, the Arab world doesn't speak for itself; it is spoken for.

As these comments flatten the Middle East into the discrete data points "dirt" and "sand," military vehicles in the background mount explosive pyrotechnic displays. Images of the landscape become overexposed, igniting flashing red color fields. Their overexposure inadvertently invokes the "most surveilled" regions on a global heatmap, sites whose data is so hypervisible that graphical representation implies they've been set aflame.

Scopic regimes that frame non-Western regions and peoples also underwrite the exhibitionary order. This series of imperially sponsored, nineteenth-century world's fairs were orchestrated to naturalize structures of colonial violence. "Ethnographic villages" were crucial to that endeavor. With titles like the "Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations," fairs assembled participating nations into hierarchical taxonomies, explicitly privileging the contributions of imperial powers.[23] They curated life-sized dioramas arranging non-Western cities as they appeared from the distorted lens of the Western imaginary. At the 1889 *Exposition Universelle* in Paris, for example, the whole of Cairo was distilled to a bazaar: exoticized dancers, a mosque inexplicably containing a coffeehouse, and donkeys that visitors could ride for one franc.[24]

Villages like these were populated by people placed on "ethnological" display alongside flora, fauna, and inanimate objects—the subject of *Couple in the Cage* (1992–93) by the artists Coco Fusco and Guillermo Gómez-Peña.[25] In this performance, Fusco and Gómez-Peña recreate the ethnological tableaus of World's Fairs past. They pose as two "undiscovered" Indigenous people from the fictive island of Guatinau, caged and placed on display to mark the quincentenary of Columbus's arrival in the Americas. As Fusco puts it, ethnographic spectacles index the colonial unconscious, offering white spectators "a confirmation of their position as global consumers of exotic cultures."[26] Khoshgozaran traces the parallels between ethnographic villages and Medina Wasl, a virtual village constructed on seized Indigenous lands in the California desert, populated by Arab-Americans performing the role of enemy combatants.[27]
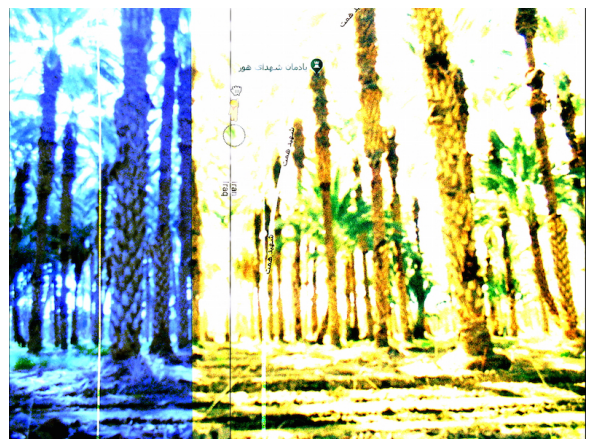
Gelare Khoshgozaran, *Medina Wasl: Connecting Town*, 2018, digital video still. Courtesy of the artist.

A desktop video plays in one vignette of *Medina Wasl*, documenting a user—presumably Khoshgozaran—interacting with the interface of what appears to be Google Earth. The coordinates of the digital

interface are set to the Iran-Iraq border. The cartographic gridlines of a digital map are transparently imposed over footage shot at Fort Irwin and set in motion. This mobility conjures the ways in which a map's regions refer not to fixed or static territories but rather to movements made by networks of geopolitical actors. The region of the "Middle East," for example, corresponds not to timeless terrain, but to a strategic practice of naming initiated by the British India Office in the 1850s.[28] In Khoshgozaran's video, digital cartographies fragment and dislocate the images beneath them, exposing the instability of Medina Wasl's spectacle. Location markers are barely legible: Arvand Rood River, Mehregan School, Cinema Naft, the Gas Station of Abadan. They disappear before they can be read. A cursor moves across the screen, navigating a 360-degree image of Arab individuals gathered at an indeterminate site. Its presence signals that every geographic information system is assembled by agents with specific positionalities who select and program its spatial representations.

Cartographic gridlines reappear later, superimposed over footage of Khoshgozaran walking through the desert dressed as an Iranian soldier from the Iran-Iraq war. She presents a queer subject in open sartorial defiance of homonationalist logics.

There is also a diasporic longing for home coded into the film's languorous, hallucinatory dreamscapes, a home that lies beyond impassable borders, encountered as a militarized bad copy in the Mojave.[29]

Khoshgozaran describes the tensions of inhabiting a landscape like Medina Wasl's:

> The immigrant in me keeps thinking I could have a job in a simulated battle as an extra: "a vetted refugee from Iran, speaks Farsi fluently with knowledge of Arabic." Then, I remember that I'm queer ... Most of the time I am even oblivious to it, until I think about the potential extra job I cannot get in a simulated battle at a military training center. What does a terrorist look like: me?[30]

Gelare Khoshgozaran, *Medina Wasl: Connecting Town*, 2018, digital video still. Courtesy of the artist.

In uniform, Khoshgozaran dances to the Tehran-based musician Makan Ashgvari's "Ahvaz." The track builds on a rhythmic, buoyant sample of two children singing in Arabic about the Iranian city of Ahvaz, overlaid with electronic flourishes. Mid-stride, Khoshgozaran's footage gives way to a scene of four Iranian soldiers performing a choreographed routine as the song continues to play. This ending recalls the iconic conclusion of Claire Denis's *Beau Travail* (1999), wherein a Foreign Legion officer awaiting court martial performs a virtuosic, convulsive dance to Corona's "Rhythm of the Night." The four soldiers' synchronized exercise is drawn from a low-resolution video uploaded to YouTube,

whose comments section calls up Puar's assertion that "queerness is always already installed in the project of naming the terrorist," a threat to the reproduction of the nation-state.[31]

Medina Wasl's finale revels in these scenes of noncompliant bodies. The sampled video seems to be staged at a military site, where the four soldiers first emerge in a tightly controlled geometric arrangement. Their entry march invokes the rigid vocabularies of a foot drill. Once in formation, the figures immediately break out of it. They abandon any sense of corporeal discipline and the structures of militarization. An uninhibited affective exuberance suffuses their motions. An affect that short-circuits datasets and regulatory protocols for identifying enemy agents. An affect that defies the logic of an impassable border.

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1. Glenn Greenwald and Ewen MacAskill, "Boundless Informant: The NSA's Secret Tool to Track Global Surveillance Data," *The Guardian*, June 11, 2013, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jun/08/nsa-boundless-informant-global-datamining.

2. "Boundless Informant NSA Data-Mining Tool – Four Key Slides," *The Guardian*, June 8, 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/world/interactive/2013/jun/08/nsa-boundless-informant-data-mining-slides.

3. As Apoorva Tadepalli summarizes, colonial cartography organized territories through a bird's-eye-view so as to mark them for ownership. See Apoorva Tadepalli, "Colonial Cartography," *Real Life Mag*, February 11, 2019, https://reallifemag.com/colonial-cartography.

4. Frank Snowden, *Epidemics and Society: From the Black Death to the Present* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019), 3.

5. Gelare Khoshgozaran in discussion with the author April 17, 2020.

6. Paul B. Preciado, "Learning from the Virus," *Artforum* (May/June 2020): https://www.artforum.com/print/202005/paul-b-preciado-82823.

7. Jasbir Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), xxiii.

8. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*, xxiii-xxiv.

9. Electronic Frontier Foundation, "New Report Finds Border Communities Inundated with Surveillance Technologies," September 11, 2019, https://www.eff.org/press/releases/new-report-finds-border-communities-inundated-surveillance-technologies.

10. Mijente, "Anduril's New Border Surveillance Contract With the US Marine Corps & CBP," July 24, 2019, https://mijente.net/2019/07/24/anduril.

11. These "border security" features are being developed by the newly launched defense tech company Anduril, which recently announced a $13.5-million contract with the U.S. Marine Corps. See Sam Dean, "A 26-Year-Old Billionaire is Building Virtual Border Walls—And the Federal Government is Buying," *Los Angeles Times*, July 26, 2019, https://www.latimes.com/business/story/2019-07-25/anduril-profile-palmer-luckey-border-controversy.

12. Gelare Khoshgozaran, "Dates, Embargoes, and Ancient Artifacts: An Iraqi-American Artist in the California Desert," *Ajam Media Collective*, June 13, 2019, https://ajammc.com/2019/06/13/dates-embargoes-artifacts-michael-rakowitz.

13. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*, 2.

14. Gelare Khoshgozaran, "Dates, Embargoes, and Ancient Artifacts."

15. Ibid.

16. Dexter Filkins and John F. Burns, "GIs 'Die' in Mock Iraqi Villages," *New York Times*, May 1, 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2006/05/01/world/americas/01iht-web.0501train.1637136.html.

17. Ibid.

18. Geoff Manaugh and Nicola Twilley, "It's Artificial Afghanistan: A Simulated Battlefield in the Mojave Desert," *The Atlantic*, May 18, 2013, https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2013/05/its-artificial-afghanistan-a-simulated-battlefield-in-the-mojave-desert/275983.

19. Khoshgozaran notes that "the Army has [her] driver license information, as required by their newly automated system." Gelare Khoshgozaran, "Terrorientalist Landscapes," *X-TRA Contemporary Art Quarterly*, June 12, 2018, https://www.x-traonline.org/online/gelare-khoshgozaran terrorientalist-landscapes.

20. Ibid.

21. Ibid.

22. Khoshgozaran traces the history and context of this term in "Terrorientalist Landscapes."

23. See, for example, Timothy Mitchell, "Orientalism and the Exhibitionary Order," in *Grasping the World: The Idea of the Museum*, eds. Donald Preziosi and Claire Farago (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2004), 442-61.

24. Mitchell, "Orientalism and the Exhibitionary Order," 443-4.

25. Coco Fusco, "The Other History of Intercultural Performance," *TDR* vol. 38, no 1 (Spring 1994): 148, 152.

26. Fusco writes that in the U.S. context, these spectacles worked to "justify genocide, enslavement, and the seizure of lands [through] a 'naturalized' splitting of humanity along racial lines." Fusco, "The Other History of Intercultural Performance," 152.

27. Khoshgozaran, "Terrorientalist Landscapes."

28. As Khoshgozaran notes, "The term 'Middle East' originated in the British India Office in the 1850s. A turbulent time of colonial expansion and war." Khoshgozaran, "Terrorientalist Landscapes."

29. Khoshgozaran writes, "Part of me wants to get there and feel at home … This is going to be the closest I will have been to the 'Middle East,' the 'Orient,' 'Home,' and the war in nine years." See Dan Bustillo and Gelare Khoshgozaran, "Between You and Me: Dan Bustillo & Gelare Khoshgozaran," *Art Practical*, March 6, 2018, https://www.artpractical.com/column/between-you-and-me-dan-bustillo-and-gelare-khoshgozaran.

30. Dan Bustillo and Gelare Khoshgozaran, "Between You and Me."

31. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*, xxiv.

GEORGIA