



Robert Frost's ambivalence: Borders and boundaries in poetic and political discourse



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ABSTRACT

Phrases from Robert Frost's well-known poem "Mending Wall" are often used to frame discussions of borders in academic and political discourse. Used by some to justify the construction of physical barriers, others have used excerpts from the poem to fundamentally question the truism it appears to project. In light of recent interest in borders, our paper returns to Frost's full poem and its contexts in order to define, theorize, and critically mobilize what we take to be a useful ambivalence regarding fences. We use Frost's formulations to address the universal difficulty of moving beyond the borders of our daily lives, whether imposed at the edges of the nation-state, inscribed in our social relations, or inferred within the formal dimensions of a poem. Working at the crossroads of political geography, psychoanalytic theory, and literary analysis we argue that addressing the central role of borders in our lives and Frost's deep ambivalence about fences and borders is a useful step in any political and aesthetic movement forward. We cannot be "good neighbors" in other words or even good co-inhabitants until and unless we acknowledge that we are ambivalent not only toward the Other, but also about the very concept of borders and boundaries itself. Ideas presented about ambivalence provide border scholars and political geographers with an opportunity to re-evaluate our positionality and recognize how our own humanity intersects with that of others.

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1. Mending Wall

1 SOMETHING there is that doesn't love a wall,
That sends the frozen-ground-swell under it,
And spills the upper boulders in the sun;
And makes gaps even two can pass abreast.
5 The work of hunters is another thing:
I have come after them and made repair
Where they have left not one stone on a stone,
But they would have the rabbit out of hiding,
To please the yelping dogs. The gaps I mean,

10 No one has seen them made or heard them made,
But at spring mending-time we find them there.
I let my neighbour know beyond the hill;
And on a day we meet to walk the line
And set the wall between us once again.
15 We keep the wall between us as we go.
To each the boulders that have fallen to each.
And some are loaves and some so nearly balls
We have to use a spell to make them balance:
"Stay where you are until our backs are turned!"
20 We wear our fingers rough with handling them.
Oh, just another kind of out-door game,
One on a side. It comes to little more:
There where it is we do not need the wall:

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He is all pine and I am apple orchard.
 25 My apple trees will never get across
 And eat the cones under his pines, I tell him.
 He only says, "Good fences make good neighbours."
 Spring is the mischief in me, and I wonder
 If I could put a notion in his head:
 30 "Why do they make good neighbours? Isn't it
 Where there are cows? But here there are no cows.
 Before I built a wall I'd ask to know
 What I was walling in or walling out,
 And to whom I was like to give offence.
 35 Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
 That wants it down." I could say "Elves" to him,
 But it's not elves exactly, and I'd rather
 He said it for himself. I see him there
 Bringing a stone grasped firmly by the top
 40 In each hand, like an old-stone savage armed.
 He moves in darkness as it seems to me,
 Not of woods only and the shade of trees.
 He will not go behind his father's saying,
 And he likes having thought of it so well
 45 He says again, "Good fences make good neighbours."

(Frost, 1915 p. 11–13; see also; Frost, 1914, 1949, 1956)

In Robert Frost's poem "Mending Wall" two rural neighbors make repairs on a common wall dividing their properties (Fig. 1). The narrator appears at first glance to be decisive about the subject of walls and fences. Use of the poem in academic border studies is largely premised on this assumption and treats its first line

"something there is that doesn't love a wall" as though it were an essential truth. The neighbor meanwhile is portrayed as resolute and a man of few words—only uttering a single phrase twice: "good fences make good neighbors." Advocates of contemporary border barriers (Fig. 2) adopt the second refrain with its no-nonsense logic as a kind of rallying cry, a deeply pragmatic position often accompanied by incredulity that anyone could fail to recognize the simple truths it contains. Whether because of the concision and apparent wisdom of the statements, or because political identification seems to require believing one set of propositions at the expense of another, the two parts of the poem tend to be taken in isolation.

We argue that what is useful and generative in "Mending Wall" is precisely its ambivalence about borders and boundaries and believe that an integrated, contextual, and holistic reading of the poem can offer political geographers a way to think about the nature of the relationship between the two perspectives presented. Such a reading of "Mending Wall" allows us to reflect on how the constant negotiation of internal and external boundaries might be motivated by something beyond mere political position—a productive and necessary ambivalence. The history we sketch of the poem's two sayings reminds us how easily aphoristic thinking can rob us of the richness of our political and personal experience. We argue that Frost's insistence on narrative complexity and struggle, what we term his "ambivalence," is not reducible to a compromise or middle path, but instead offers a radical awareness of and responsiveness to the ways our political ideas and commitments are being constantly formed and reformed.

Parker et al. (2009) write that a binary opposition has come to dominate Western understandings of borders, obscuring dynamics of "undecidability, indistinction and indeterminacy" (p. 584). This call to look beyond the dualisms that borders represent is a starting point for border studies and the discipline of political geography more broadly. Perhaps not surprisingly, discussions of ambivalence do appear to be emerging in studies that consider borders in détente, as opposed to active fortification (Till et al., 2013). Yet there is value to ambivalence in both of these contexts and perhaps especially so in the latter case where it is not easily practiced. Just as geographers have broadened their scope in terms of where borders and bordering processes are found (i.e. Johnson et al., 2011; Lamb, 2014; Mountz, 2013), the discipline should also open itself up to internal conceptualizations of ambivalence.



Fig. 1. The wall at the Frost homestead, Derry, New Hampshire, 2015. Photo by Julie Ames.



Fig. 2. U.S.-Mexico border barrier near Naco, Arizona/Sonora, 2009. Photo by Kenneth D. Madsen.

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