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Often surveillance and monitoring technologies are seen as separate and distinct objects. Each put to use by particular government agencies to collect, store, and manage data about it about specific subjects. Recent advancements in information technologies (IT) and database management systems forces us to revisit this understanding of technology. In the context of border management and immigrate enforcement, the US Department of Homeland Security’s (DHS) uses an array of complex border technologies such as walls, check points, and digital technologies (video and audio monitoring, biometrics recording, identification data bases, ect). This border surveillance infrastructure is not only geographically transforming US borders, but it also changing the legal, political, economic, and foundations which bolster the liberal nation state and its subjects.DHS’ interest in information-based integration is not limited in use to internal management of the state but is also seeking to extend this information infrastructure throughout the globe. Take for example, the US Department of Homeland Security’s Science and Technology web page,[[1]](#footnote-1) which states:

“Blockchain and Distributed Ledgers are innovative technologies that have many uses and applications across multiple sectors of the economy. From a government perspective, the technology holds the potential for enhanced transparency and auditing of public service operations, greater supply chain visibility to combat the distribution of counterfeit products, and automation of paper-based processes to improve delivery of services to organizations and citizens. Examples include ensuring the authenticity and integrity of videos and photos from cameras; sensors and Internet of Things devices; enhancing and facilitating international trade and customs processes; facilitating and securing passenger processing; and mitigating forgery and counterfeiting of official licenses and certificates.

DHS and Blockchain

There are several Department of Homeland Security (DHS) use cases that could be enabled by blockchain technology, including:

* Digital issuance of currently paper-based credentials to enhance their security, ensure their interoperability, and prevent their forgery and counterfeiting
* Creating immutable records and audit logs of data that cannot be spoofed and can be publicly verified without revealing personally identifiable information
* Improving traveler experience in airports by reducing redundant checks
* Reducing fraud in the transfer of goods across international boundaries that touch multiple entities who do not trust each other”

My research follows DHS’ information infrastructure and look at places where theses border transformations materialize. In this reflection, I will focus on a chapter of my dissertation (currently in publication). Here is the abstract:

The Sanctuary City Movement[[2]](#footnote-2), which aims to combat racialized social exclusion against non-citizsens, has reemerged at a time when all scales of governance produce, store, and utilize extensive quantities of data. Municipal policies, like those in San Francisco, rely on data interoperability—networks of integrated databases—to extend what I call “administrative sanctuary.” The inclusionary practices of administrative sanctuary grant non-citizens access to differential residency by cataloguing and inventorying personal data (e.g. municipal identification cards, driver’s licenses, and job training). In so doing, they document the “undocumented.” Acknowledging that non-citizens’ data may be at risk, the city of San Francisco has implemented safety measures. However, DHS’ concurrent investment in data interoperability renders the protections of administrative sanctuary limited at best.

US Borders can no longer be understood as walls, but rather all “management practices directed at ‘where the migrant is.” Indeed, sites such as detention centers, airports, and wallets are extensions of borders. If borders are a multitude of institutions and practices of migrant management, I then ask; how are these institutions and practices linked and coordinated? And what value is produced in their operation? I began by highlighting the Department of Homeland Security increased corporate-state partnership with the information technology industry. I argue that a database infrastructure, not a wall, is the backbone of the US border. I then follow, DHS’ database infrastructure to the city of San Francisco (SF), a self-proclaimed sanctuary city and innovator in smart city technologies. SF also relies a database infrastructure for administrative practices. In fact, similar to DHS, SF has implemented networks of integrated databases to facilitate “smart governance.” Although, SF sanctuary ordinance prohibits the use of municipal resources and employees to assist in border enforcement, the city, however, does cooperates with DHS in other capacities. For example, providing access to individual’s health and law enforcement data through disaster preparedness and urban securitization projects such as the Bay Area Urban Areas Security Initiative[[3]](#footnote-3). I suggest that DHS funded city and regional programs are integrated with border enforcement databases, and thus extensions of the border. Next, I argue, that through database integration, DHS’ border is just not a technology that encloses US territory from the territories of other nation-states, but it also operates to enclose migrants from citizenship. DHS’ hi-tech border ensures conditions for the transnational circulation of capital, labor, and resources, while also operating as ledger technology, or digital check- point that makes computational decisions, calculating migrant deportability based on their labor productivity and state cost of social reproduction. This US corporate-state led project is intensifying group “differentiated premature death” (Gilmore, 2007)[[4]](#footnote-4) through the management of what I call an “arch of enclosures” that continuously travels with people throughout the entire migration process. Lastly, I suggest that SF sanctuary city is not a beacon for migrant protection, but, rather, presents us the limits of liberal inclusion under racial capitalism.

1. https://www.dhs.gov/science-and-technology/blockchain-portfolio [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See: Paik.A.N (2020). “Bans, Walls, Raids, Sanctuary Understanding U.S. Immigration for the Twenty-First Century.” University of California Press.

Cobarrubias, S., et al. (2015). Externalization. *Cultural Studies: New Keywords: Migration and Borders* 29(1), 73. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See: http://www.bayareauasi.org [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Wilson Glimore. R. (2007) Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California. University of California Press. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)