

Demarcating Fences: Power, Settler-Militarism, and the Carving of Urban Futenma

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Abstract

The following images highlight how the chain linked fence surrounding military installations represent power, surveillance, and verticality. By day, community members of the densely populated Ginowan-shi in Okinawa claim space on the land in front of an entrance to Marine Corps Air Station (MCAS) Futenma, with protest signs visible to all U.S. service members and Okinawan-civilian contractors of the injustice present from the settler-military force. By night, the focus shifts to an unforeseen U.S. military intervention, in conjunction with Okinawan law enforcement and construction workers, to quell the protests by reoccupying the sidewalk, pushing protesters further from the gates of the contentious site and attempting to contain their efforts away from the base.

The chain-linked fence is an ever-present reminder that Okinawa hosts an occupying American military forces in a series of bases since World War II. Drawing from Christina Sharp and Simone Brown's work, the fence represents a wake as well as a technology of social control that reifies boundaries, borders, and bodies between racialized spaces. The fence as a vertical structure surrounds every military installation on the island, a vertical barrier that physically separates military from civilian, American from non-American, and settler from indigenous.

By day, community members of the densely populated Ginowan-shi in Okinawa claim space on the land in front of an entrance to Marine Corps Air Station (MCAS) Futenma, the site of numerous tensions between Okinawans and Americans, holding protest signs visible to all U.S. service members and Okinawan-civilian contractors of the injustices present from the settler-military force. By night, the focus shifts to an unforeseen U.S. military intervention, in conjunction with Okinawan law enforcement and construction workers, to quell the protests by reoccupying the sidewalk, pushing protesters further from the gates of the contentious site and attempting to contain their efforts away from the base.

This series illustrates how the fence is used to reconfigure base boundaries. The fence demarcates a line between a suburban, America-occupied space and an urban, racialized, and indigenous other, where colonially derived forms of surveillance render indigenous bodies visible. It represents a wake, a marker of settler-militarism that reproduces conditions of containment, regulation, punishment, and occupation. As a wake, it also masks the settler-soldiers who occupy the space within, while instead making Okinawans on both sides of the fence visible towards the maintenance and justification of the military presence. This reaffirms the impact of settler-militarism on either side of the fence: by community members who choose to engage with and protest against the occupying force and the dangers of their presence, while in constant negotiation of individuals who affirm their necessity as a form of economic stability and security.

The images also highlight the limits of the fence and gesture to its role in the projection of settler-militaristic power vertically. While the fence is temporarily rooted in the occupied land, the aircraft operating from MCAS Futenma projects a power that has detrimental effects to the security of the land and people around the base. Although they are not present from these specific images, the notions are ever-present in the protest imagery, the history of U.S. military incidents in Okinawa, and the deafening sound that lingers throughout the day and night around these occupied spaces of American influence.



Fig. 1. An elderly Okinawan woman holds a sign, reading “US Forces Destroy Okinawa! Why? How Come?” in front of the MCAS Futenma gate as commuters pass by. Many of the protesters donned a vest reading “No Osprey Base” to critique the planned transfer of V-22 Osprey aircraft to Futenma. Other signs include the mantra “No base, no rape” to highlight the history of violent sexual misconduct incidents between soldiers and Okinawans. Photo credit: Ethan Caldwell.



Fig. 2. An older Okinawan community member, holding a sign that reads “Remove ospreys and close Futenma base” speaks in Japanese and English to those who pass by, pleading with them to stop and question the military presence in Okinawa as well as the activities that occur within the confines of the base. Photo credit: Ethan Caldwell.



Fig. 3: Signage along the base fence line, close to the Highway 330, provides an explanation for the protests as well as the campaign by Ginowan community members against the Osprey. This image highlights the importance of verticality by denoting the limits of the fence as military and settler supremacy exceeds the structure, permeating above and beyond the base. Photo credit: Ethan Caldwell.



Fig. 4. As community members gather to physically block the surprise construction of a new fence in the pedestrian space in front of the base, young Okinawan police officers are used in and stage across the street to disrupt their efforts. Photo credit: Ethan Caldwell.



Fig. 5. This image was taken shortly after the older Okinawa man attempted to physically break down the fence. The image highlights the new temporary fence between Okinawans, highlighting the generational divide between community and police, while the fence stands in as the wake of the American military occupying forces. Photo credit: Ethan Caldwell.



Fig. 6. Ginowan city councilman and community organizer, Isao Tomaru, stands in frame with other older Okinawans stand pensively as younger policemen stand at guard to protect the late-night construction efforts. Photo credit: Ethan Caldwell.



Fig. 7. An Okinawan policeman looks out into the crowd to thwart attempts by community members to end or delay construction. Numerous Okinawans position the conflict between base and community members, in part, on a generational divide, with those with memories of the war and those who have only known an Okinawa with an American military presence. Photo credit: Ethan Caldwell.



Fig. 8. Community members began to shout directly at police and reporters, pleading to stop construction and the larger injustices presented by the U.S. military's control in Okinawa. Photo credit: Ethan Caldwell.



Fig. 9. While the mass of community members put forward their efforts to disrupt the construction by the equipment and main entrance, a small contingent of Okinawan women at the fringes of the construction began undoing the metal ties that held the fence together. Photo credit: Ethan Caldwell.



Fig. 10. This image captures a wider view of the base, showing the old and new fence being constructed, as well as the mass of Okinawan community members, policemen, and reporters. Behind the main construction lighting stood U.S. military security forces, surveilling the scene from a distance while remaining in the shadows. Photo credit: Ethan Caldwell.

About the author

Ethan Caldwell is an assistant professor of Ethnic Studies at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa. He received his PhD in African American Studies from Northwestern University. His research interests examine the intersections of race, Blackness, Oceania, and settler militarism. In his current book project, Ethan analyzes how these dynamic historical constructions are formed, challenged, and impacted through interactions between African American soldiers and Okinawan civilians. His photography projects include collaborative exhibits that analyze war, historical memory, and surveillance, and foodways.