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Politics in *The River and The Wall* (2017)

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Martina Moeller

(Manouba University)

This study examines in how far Ben Masters manages to combine in his nature film *The River and the Wall* (2017) two goals: to document the borderlands and to explore the potential impact of a future wall on the natural environment. In this context, the study explores in detail how discourses around nature, border fences and immigration are presented in the film and to what extend they are critical of Trump's wall project. The author comes to the conclusion that the film's suggestion to create a bi-national park along the borderlands is strongly reminiscent of John Muir's romantic legacy. However, precisely this romanticized focus on nature seems to undermine the political discussion, because it marginalizes key aspects of the debate, from illegal migration to drug trafficking, in its nostalgic proposal to go back to cowboy 'roots'.

Keywords: Wild life films, Donald Trump's wall, Hispanics in cinema, illegal immigration to the U.S.A., identity in cinema



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(Manouba University)

1) Introduction

Donald Trump's electoral promises included an upgrading of the Mexico-United States border to prevent illegal immigration from Central America. The issue of building the wall and extending the existing border has been discussed since then as a controversial topic. Many commentators doubt that the wall can be an effective means to reduce illegal work migration, terrorism and drug smuggling and outline the positive effects of work migration on the US economy.¹ It has also been argued that expanding the wall is first and foremost a politically motivated project in order to boost Trump's chances of being re-elected.²

Initially constructed under US President George H. W. Bush in the mid-1990s, the existing fences cover roughly 2,000 miles of border between the United States and Mexico. The already existing barriers cut across a variety of terrains, ranging from urban areas to deserts. Kevin Dahl of the National Parks Conservation Association outlines the negative effects of the planned border wall on nature: "This unneeded, expensive blight will use precious water for its construction, cut off wildlife species from their habitat; and its all-night lights will destroy the clear night skies" (Dahl in Gilbert 2019).

Ben Masters' documentary *The River and the Wall* (2017) takes up this line of argument and explores the borderlands to investigate the potential impacts of a future wall on the natural environment. Masters' travel team consists only of nature specialists and experienced travel guides such as the ornithologist Heather Mackey, conservationist Jay Kleberg, the river guide Austin Alvarado and the filmmaker Filipe DeAndrade. This choice seems to underline the goal of a critical investigation. Together they travel 1,200 miles of the US-Mexican border on horseback, mountain bike and by canoe, which takes them two-and-a-half-months, to explore the different areas along the fences and where the wall is still to be constructed.

¹ A Health and Human Services (HHS) report found, "the net economic impact of resettling refugees in the United States over a decade was overwhelmingly positive. [...] In other words, the argument that Miller had been repeatedly making about the soaring costs of resettling refugees in the United States was invalid" (Hirschfeld Davis / Shear 2019: 140).

² See Hirschfeld Davis / Shear (2019).

As a nature documentary *The River and the Wall* corresponds to the generic key characteristics of blue chip programming, which are known for avoiding political issues as Bousé summarises very explicitly:

Blue chip programmes depict charismatic mega-fauna, such as big cats, primates and elephants; they contain spectacular imagery of animals in a "primeval wilderness"; they incorporate dramatic and suspenseful storylines; they generally avoid science, politics and controversial issues, such as wildlife conservation; they are timeless, carefully framing out any historical reference points which might date the programme or effect future rerun sales; and they avoid people, including presenters and all artefacts of human habitation (in Richards 2013: 174; see also Bousé 2000: 14f.).

In this sense, Masters' documentary highlights dramatic sceneries and provides suspenseful or funny storylines about life in nature. However, at the same time, its focus on the border fences and future wall constructions gives the film also a political agenda. I will investigate how interwoven these two agendas are both in the film's narrative structure and visual style, and how Trump's wall project is presented.

For example, as opposed to the blue chip generics, the film addresses political issues directly by interviewing people about their opinion on border constructions, while most film reviews praise in particular the documentary's visual style and the impressive images of nature. A good example is provided by Martinez:

Where *The River and the Wall* truly excels is in the photography of the picture. We're not sure which of the five credited cinematographers captured most of the doc's nature footage, but every scene shot under the sky is breathtaking (Martinez 2019).

Blakemore even muses that the film is at its best when it is only showing nature pictures:

The soaring visuals of the Rio Grande have a grace and gravitas that transcends politics. And though "The River and the Wall" has something to say, it's most powerful when it doesn't say anything at all (Blakemore 2019).

These reviews highlight that blue chip generics of depicting overwhelming nature sceneries might have such a strong impact on the film's visual style that at least for most reviewers the typical filmic conventions of nature documentaries appear to marginalise the political agenda. Nevertheless, the film also introduces political discourse very explicitly: At the beginning, we see a montage of short sequences of political statements by Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama and Donald Trump on fences as a solution to the "immigration problem" of the United States. Upbeat music underlines the visual impact of these sequences and finally joins the rhythm of a Trump rally, where participants shout the slogan "Build the wall". A panoramic shot of the tranquil river and its natural environment is juxtaposed with these emotionally high-pitched images. The opening sequence thus evokes a heavy contrast between the somewhat artificial

political debates and the peaceful nature, seemingly untouched by these debates. As we will see later in more detail, these first sequences introduce a narrative structure that is organised around an opposition between nature and civilisation, within which especially Trump's wall project and his propaganda against illegal immigrants from Central America shape a negative image of US American civilization.

In the following sequence, we see Masters driving in a car to meet his buddies for the trip along the border and the river. This sequence introduces him as director of the documentary and its main narrator. He states as the goal of the journey that he wants to find out how a wall might affect the people, wildlife and plants along the Rio Grande. He also mentions that he conceived the idea of the documentary while working for a team of wildlife biologists in West Texas, who shared their concerns regarding the impacts of a border wall on wildlife species along the Rio Grande.³ This statement underlines once again the film's political agenda of examining Trump's wall plans by exploring the impact of the constructions on nature. However, the film's narrative structure is not always in line with this statement as Martinez highlights: "A lot of good information is shared in *The River and the Wall*, although Masters' mission seems a bit broad from the start and continues to spread itself thin throughout the film" (Martinez 2019).

This introduction sets the tone of Masters' agenda, which appears to match the point of view of many scientists describing the wall as an essential danger to nature.⁴ In opposition to most articles and television documentaries on Trump's proposed wall and the already existing fences, Masters' documentary does not primarily emphasize border security issues and ethical arguments concerning illegal immigration. Instead, the documentary focuses on nature and the political debates that target this nature as main characters. Thanks to this focus on nature and politics, the film's narrative structure seems to present an alternative approach towards the discussion about the border constructions. Yet, its overloaded narration and the overwhelming blue chip visual style appear to weaken the effect of environmental and political discussion concerning Trump's project.

To address this working hypothesis, I will first analyse how the film's narrative approaches the subjects of nature, border walls and illegal immigration. Concerning the latter, I will take a closer look on how the film presents two members of Masters' team, who are examples of illegal migration to the US. I will then investigate how the film approaches political and environmental

³ See Masters (2019: 04':05"-04':47").

⁴ To give an example, a 2018 paper signed by more than 2,500 researchers lays out some of the threats, which range from wasting conservation investments to causing floods, endangering animal migrations and destroying all kinds of habitats (see Defenders of Wildlife 2018).

discourse. This includes a discussion of the narrative function of 'experts' that appear as talking heads in the film, such as the two US representatives – congressmen Beto O'Rourke, who is a Democrat (Texas), and Will Hurd, a Republican (Texas) – as well as wildlife biologists, Border Patrol agents and others. In the last part, I will explore how a consensus is created on the narrative level that marginalises problems along the border area.

2) Into the Wild: Towards 'a new American outdoor identity'

Ben Masters is a filmmaker, writer, and photographer currently living in Austin, Texas, where he studied wildlife biology at Texas A&M University until 2010. Like all the other members of his team, Masters is closely associated through his work to the border area (especially the Big Bend area of the Rio Grande). In 2015, he produced and acted in *Unbranded*, a documentary film directed by Phillip Baribeau. *Unbranded* depicts – just like *The River and the Wall* – a long journey (3,000 miles) through the wilderness of the American West. With three fellow graduates, Masters embarks here for more than five months on an expedition with sixteen mustangs from the Mexican to the Canadian border.⁵ The film's overall goal was to promote the adoption of wild horses, but much like *The River and the Wall*, it received more praise for 'gorgeously photographed' sceneries than narrative impact.

Already in *Unbranded*, the travelling party includes several of the director's male university buddies. They appear in an adventurous narrative setting surrounded by breath-taking scenery and wildlife. All these narrative elements are in my opinion highly reminiscent of the romanticized image of Wild West nature and cowboys. In *The River and The Wall*, this narrative setting is taken up again, although the ornithologist Heather Mackey joins the team of buddies as a female character. I would argue that in both films, Ben Masters – a white American – presents himself as a modern cowboy: His outdoor clothes, his body movements, the heavily meaningful way and dark voice he speaks in, and also the ponies he raises are aspects that reconstruct an American identity, which builds upon 'male cowboy experiences' in the wilderness of the American Southwest.

The second main character of the buddy-team is the conservationist Jay Kleberg whose appearance (beard, family father with outdoor-clothing) matches Masters' cowboy style. In the film, Kleberg explains that

[a]n ancestor of mine who was Parks and Wildlife commissioner back in the 30s and 40s, visited this country, when they were looking at designating Big Bend National Park. And

⁵ The crossing took place almost entirely on public land, including such national parks as Yellowstone, the Grand Canyon and Glacier National Park. "The wilderness gave birth to the American identity and reinforced its validity throughout the Nineteenth century, but its cache of natural resources also made the country rich" (Johns 2007).

he was a relatively famous rancher. So that's in his blood and he sees how am I gonna produce off of that land. And his comment (is) that the highest and best use for that land is for public recreation. [...] It is important to me to complete that circle and try and protect an area that he saw promising. That is threatened right now by the law (Kleberg in Masters 2019: 28':10"-28':55").

Through this statement, the film creates a continuity from ranchers nearly hundred years ago to contemporary conservationists, who want to preserve the wilderness of Texas. Kleberg's statement is furthermore highly reminiscent of John Muir (1839-1914), the 'father' of the national parks and the environmental movement in the US, who opposed the industrialisation of America's wilderness by arguing that nature is not a resource to be harvested but a treasure to be preserved. Nature was for Muir a place for recreation and of higher spirituality, and this nature approach builds upon an opposition between civilization and nature. In this sense, nature has to be saved from so-called civilisation, because capitalist exploitation as guiding principle of US civilization is likely to destroy it. It could be argued that Muir fundamentally changed the way Americans see nature, and Kleberg's ancestor might have even been a follower of Muir's movement. In this context, Kleberg's statement promotes a return to an authentic American lifestyle and values in harmony with nature, such as represented by his ancestor and Muir.

In the film, Kleberg's comments are visually supported by aerial panorama shots of the landscape of the Big Bend. Masters and his friends ride on horses against this natural backdrop. The images are bathed in a soft evening light in combination with highly romantic extradiegetic music. This visual and acoustic orchestration of the landscape and Kleberg's argument represents the American Southwest as a collective symbol for all Americans and recalls the myth of the Wild West – such as depicted in Hollywood cowboy films. I want to argue that this collective imagery is the reason why Kleberg wants to preserve the wilderness.

The English researcher Eric Hobsbawm conceives of the American West as a collective imaginary of the American idea of freedom and independence, which is the essence of American identity. In an article on the myth of cowboys, Hobsbawm points out that the image of the Wild West in Hollywood films is based on "the confrontation of nature and civilisation, and of freedom with social constraint" (Hobsbawm 2013). Furthermore, Hobsbawm argues

Civilisation is what threatens nature; and their move from bondage or constraint into independence, which constitutes the essence of America as a radical European ideal in the 18th and early 19th centuries, is actually what brings civilisation into the wild west and so destroys it (Hobsbawm 2013).

Kleberg – a modern 'conservationist' (thus, a modern version of Muir) continues – in line with John Muir and his ancestor – the tradition of preserving the land in its authentic condition

because of its symbolic value as a collective identity symbol for all Americans. In this respect, the aestheticized representation of nature highlights the wilderness as a pillar of the myth of an authentic American identity, to which civilisation – now represented by Trump's politics – is a threat.

The film's narrative structure of traveling along the borderlands in combination with Kleberg's and Masters' deep connection with nature presents these two characters as 'new American outdoor identity model'. In the film, they already appear as model for the two other male characters, Austin Alvarado and Filipe DeAndrade, who have family histories marked by illegal immigration to the US. The personal stories of Alvarado and DeAndrade are narratively interwoven with the trip along the border. Like every other character, they have several short sequences during the trip, in which they speak about themselves, their ideas about the wilderness and the wall.

Alvarado is a Guatemalan-American, born in Austin, Texas. During his childhood, he went back and forth between Austin and Guatemala. Having earned a Bachelor of Science in Recreation, Parks and Tourism Science, he worked as a river guide on the Rio Grande and in the Big Bend National Park. Having explored natural environments all over the world, he considers the Rio Grande valley his home. Like the other male characters, Alvarado's identity construction as an American is intimately linked to the nature and landscape around the Rio Grande.

In the film, Alvarado describes working in nature very explicitly as a shelter from social attributions and class status (55:54).⁶ The wilderness of the American West allows him to forget about economic and sociocultural distinctions through ethnicity and class status. This is why he feels connected to the Big Bend and the river. For Alvarado, the Rio Grande is "such an equalizer" (Masters 2019: 57':01"). Considering that Alvarado is a migrant from Latin America, his perspective mythifies nature as a space of equality and as a sanctuary for those who suffer discrimination in US society for ethical reasons. He enriches the image of the above-outlined 'new American outdoor identity' by highlighting its inclusive character.

Filipe DeAndrade's story resembles Alvarado's. He was born in Brazil, immigrated to the United States at age six, and grew up in Cleveland, Ohio. DeAndrade is a director for the Comfort Theory production company and a host for NatGeo Wild's UnTamed web series. The American wilderness and wildlife of Texas are his main passion and the subject of his work as a filmmaker. In the film, he claims: "the natural world saved me" (e.g. playing as a child in

⁶ See Masters (2019: 55':54").

nature; Masters 2019: 01:10':34"). He also refers to nature as a sanctuary to which as a child he could escape and where he could forget the difficulties of being an immigrant. DeAndrade describes his present-day work as a means to give something back to the country of which he is now proud to be a citizen.⁷ In this respect, he also represents a model of successful immigration, in much the same way as Alvarado.

Furthermore, DeAndrade represents the funny character in the film. He is the one who makes everybody laugh. His character underlines the film's feel good attitude, which goes along the whole buddy adventure story. Even if they encounter difficulties along their trip, DeAndrade's jokes lighten up the situation and reintroduce a positive atmosphere. This narrative structure repeatedly provides a turn for the better, and problems related to the borderlands are sidestepped by this happy go lightly attitude.

Thus, we may conclude that the film's narrative evolves around these four main typecast characters and their buddy experiences on the journey along the border. Masters and Kleberg set the benchmark of a new American outdoor identity, shaped through the imaginary of the wilderness and adventurous experiences in nature. They appear as an identity model for 'new arrivals' like Alvarado and DeAndrade. The latter's successful immigration is confirmed because they have already adapted to these established identity patterns. DeAndrade's joking attitude creates a feel good movie atmosphere and thus helps to sidestep difficult realities. Mackey, the only female character, can be read as an apologetic female presence. Introduced as an ornithologist, she explains the consequences of the wall for birds and other animals. Yet apart from that, her character does not contribute very much to the development of the film's narrative. However, ultimately, all five characters are nature and wildlife lovers who can be resumed under the new American outdoor identity. As typecast characters, they propose a narrative of consensus concerning Trump's wall, which will be explored further in the next chapter.

3) Political discourses and the creation of consensus in Masters' documentary

Masters and his friends present the river and its surroundings as a unique part of the landscape of the American West. This uniqueness, the film argues, justifies the creation of a big (bi)national park. In line with the above-mentioned significance of nature, the new outdoor identity patterns and the formation of a (bi)national park, the film promotes a strong consensual discourse that marginalises wall rhetoric.

⁷ See Masters (2019: 01:12':23")

However, Masters' proposal to create a (bi)national park does not consider illegal immigration or drug trafficking at the borderlands, which Trump stylises as a major problem for the US that can only be overcome by the construction of a wall. The focus on the (bi)national park idea does therefore ultimately de-politicise the documentary. To explore this hypothesis, I will examine more closely the interviews with two US representatives in the film – congressmen Beto O'Rourke (Democrat, Texas), and Will Hurd (Republican, Texas).

William Hurd has been the Republican US representative for Texas' 23rd congressional district since 2015; he is also a former CIA officer. Hurd's district stretches about 550 miles (890 km) from San Antonio to El Paso along the US-Mexican border. Furthermore, he is, in 2019, the sole remaining Republican representative from a district along the US-Mexican border.⁸ Hurd is the first (and only) Black Republican in the House of Representatives and he is considered one of the most moderate Republicans in the House.⁹ A short glance at his political agenda confirms his relatively moderate profile and he has received praise for his bipartisan strides as a lawmaker.¹⁰ In August 2019, the Dallas Morning News praised his achievements as a politician by underlining that Hurd's "refreshing, common-sense legislating separated him from reflexive party-line orthodoxy" (Dallas Morning News Editorial 2019).

Hurd's points of view on immigration and the wall are not aligned with Trump's politics. He spoke out against Trump's 2017 executive order to build a wall along the southern border with Mexico, saying it was a "third-century solution to a 21st-century problem" and the "most expensive and least effective way to secure the border" (Hurd in Kens 5 Staff 2017). Hurd instead advocates for a "flexible, sector-by-sector approach that empowers Border Patrol agents on the ground with the resources they need" (Hurd in Kens 5 Staff 2017). He proposes using "a mix of technology" and argues that "[i]t's going to be significantly cheaper than building a wall. Let's focus on drug traffickers [...] kingpin human smugglers" (Brodesky 2017). Hurd's political convictions regarding border control highlight his moderate profile within the Republican Party. Concerning the border issues, he agrees almost in every point with his Democratic homologue, Congressman Beto O'Rourke, who is also interviewed in the documentary.

As with Hurd, O'Rourke's political convictions concerning the border are marked by his personal experience of living in the border region. This experience gave O'Rourke "a strong

⁸ He is one of seven Black representatives in the House of Representatives. In Hurd's opinion, the principal role of the government in the lives of African-Americans should be to empower them to develop their own situation (see Hohmann 2019).

⁹ See Hohmann (2019).

¹⁰ See Lambrecht (2018).

understanding of immigration's impact on our community" (O'Rourke 2014: 302), as he outlines in Masters' film. Furthermore, he opposes Trump's policy of separating families at the borders and denies that the wall could serve as a useful tool to prevent illegal immigration and drug trafficking. After the August 2019 El Paso shooting (investigated by the FBI as an act of domestic terrorism), O'Rourke publicly criticized Trump's bleak and demagogic rhetoric on immigration. He pointed out that the fear and anxiety stirred up by Trump concerning immigrants was in no way helpful for resolving the problems on the border.

Although coming from different political parties, O'Rourke and Hurd share the same perspective on the wall. They both reject the wall as a suitable means to prevent illegal immigration. Their very similar lines of argument create the impression that local Democratic and Republican politicians agree in a consensual way. O'Rourke and Hurd represent the traditional model of American bipartisan politics that, according to Greene, focuses more on compromise than on outlining controversial aspects of an issue.¹¹ This discursive arrangement in the film suggests that problems are solved – since Democrats and Republicans are in agreement. Therefore, the whole issue on Trump's wall, the immigration problems and drug trafficking are in the film sidestepped by an apparent solution: Masters' and Kleberg's proposal for the creation of a (bi)national park. All this shifts the whole discussion of Trump's border wall in a direction that depoliticises the subject. The creation of a (bi)national park is ultimately an idea that avoids a deeper discussion of the political controversies related to Trump's border wall project.

4) Discourses on immigration in Masters' *The River and The Wall*

Towards the end of the film, the subject of illegal immigration is accorded a more prominent place. It is reintroduced when Masters and his friends encounter Stevie Sauer, the Executive Vice President of the National Border Patrol Council 2366,¹² who says that a wall is not of any use for preventing immigration and drug smuggling without having personnel being able to act on the ground. Nevertheless, he outlines that the numbers of illegal immigrants crossing the wall have dropped. In the 1980s and in 2005, the crossings at the US southwest border reached various peaks with around 1,500,000 crossings, but already in 2017, only 304,000 crossings were measured in the lower Rio Grande valley.¹³

The next interview partner is Victoria DeFrancesco Soto of the LBJ School of Public Affairs (University of Austin, Texas) who talks about the Bracero Program of 1965 that established

¹¹ See Greene (2010).

¹² See Masters (2019: 01:13':27").

¹³ See Masters (2019: 01:15':13").

work migration between the US and Mexico. This program brought Mexican workers to the US. The program was eventually cancelled, but the established patterns of work migration between the US and Mexico continued. Although illegal, the Mexican workers were tolerated until the late 1980s, when immigration reached a peak. This information on illegal immigration is juxtaposed with some insight to the problems of drug smuggling and dealing by Hurd and O'Rourke.¹⁴ They both explain that the US itself is creating problems related to the drug smuggling and illegal arms traffic. However, these facts on the drug situation do not lead to any conclusions within the film's discourse. The subject is shortly introduced but not reconnected to the main narrative and argument. Furthermore, there is no discussion of how a (bi)national park could be a solution for dealing with the problems related to drug trafficking and illegal immigration.

All this background information on immigration and drug trafficking finally leads to an accidental nocturnal encounter with an invisible group of immigrants or drug smugglers. While paddling along the river by night, Masters gets separated from the rest of the group. His friends hear noises from the supposed immigrants or drug smugglers. This potentially dangerous encounter leads to the discussion of a moral dilemma: should or should they not call border police? During this discussion, the film highlights the reactions of the two Hispanic members of the group: DeAndrade points out that he would not want to call the police unless these people are really drug smugglers; Alvarado appears to be emotionally touched and reminded of his own family story. Finally, they call the border police and the film's narration focuses on Alvarado's family history.

From 1960 to 1996, Guatemala suffered a civil war, which is why his family decided to illegally immigrate to the US; they only achieved this on their fourth attempt. Alvarado's story has an important impact on the story. It gives illegal immigrants a face and a voice and therefore their destinies become more concrete and tangible. The emotional impact of these sequences and the level of compassion they raise are a climactic point in the film. However, concerning the underlying political question – whether or not to build a wall – this storyline does not provide much useful insight or arguments. Although the highly emotional impact of Alvarado's family story deconstructs in a certain way Donald Trump's pejorative rhetoric on illegal immigrants, this presentation of the subject fails because of the already apparent solution of creating a (bi)national park. On the contrary, the emotional undertone provides drama and stirs compassion instead of opening a deeper discussion on how to deal with the illegal immigration

¹⁴ See Masters (2019: 01:17:34").

problems. Thanks to the happy conclusion of having eventually received American citizenship, Alvarado's family story appears more as a stroke of destiny than as the result of historical and political measures taken by different US governments. In this respect, Alvarado's personal story avoids a more in-depth discussion of illegal immigration. These problems are depoliticized because they are not narratively related to the current problems along the border and of the happy ending for Alvarado's family.

5) Conclusion: *The River and The Wall* – a nature documentary without political weight?

We have seen that Masters' *The River and The Wall* provides a narrative that is presented, especially at the film's beginning, as politically charged but finally does later shift away from the politically motivated argument toward proposing the creation of a (bi)national park. The formation of a (bi)national park presents a consensus all the different voices in the film can agree on. However, it does not clarify how the park might prevent problems of illegal immigration and drug trafficking along the borderlands. Thus, this solution does not really propose valid arguments for preventing Trump's border wall. It shifts the audience attention away from problematic aspects and suggests a superfluous solution. Thanks to the creation of this consensual discourse the real problems linked to the border seem rather forgotten at the end. This ending, together with the film's overall buddy-movie angle, depoliticizes the whole subject through its celebration of the different characters and their glorious time together. Furthermore, the impact of breath-taking images of nature in combination with highly romanticizing emotional music also creates consensus on the uniqueness of the landscape that should be saved because of its symbolic value for American national identity – such as once proposed by John Muir and Kleberg's ancestor.

Although one major argument against Trump's wall is repeated several times in the film, no coherent political argument is built around this issue: representatives Hurd and O'Rourke both dismantle Trump's rhetoric on the wall as a bulwark against illegal immigration by outlining that the wall is no effective tool to make the border region safer. Hurd argues that modern technologies are safer and less expensive for achieving this goal.¹⁵ This suggestion could have been used to build a main line of argument and to dismantle Trump's rhetoric. Yet, the constant creation of consensual discourse avoids a focus on difficult aspects and provides a narrative that everybody (the characters as well as the audience) can agree upon. Thus through too much consensus, the film ultimately achieves a de-politicization of its ostensible subject, the border

¹⁵ See Masters (2019: 01:36:00").

wall. Instead, nature is presented as a romanticized and sublime space for recreation and identity building, in which one can escape from more serious political problems and find an imagined 'authentic American outdoor identity'.

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